

# SYPHILIS FACT SHEET

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## What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) made up of four total stages (with different signs and symptoms) that can cause serious health problems if left untreated.

## How does it spread?

You can get syphilis by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has syphilis sore. Additionally, a pregnant person with untreated syphilis can transfer the infection to their baby during pregnancy.

## Signs and Symptoms

There are four stages of syphilis (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary) and each stage will have different signs and symptoms:

- **Primary Stage:** You may notice a single or multiple sores (the location of the sores is where syphilis has entered the body. The sores are usually round, firm, and painless and can last between 3–6 weeks regardless of treatment. If you receive treatment during this stage, you will not move into the secondary stage.
- **Secondary Stage:** In the secondary stage, you may notice skin rashes and/or sores in the infected site. The skin rash can start on one or more parts of the body (including the palm of your hands or at the bottom of your feet), and can show up whilst your primary sore is healing or after the sore has already healed with the appearance of rough and red or reddish brown, usually, the rash won't itch and can be faint enough to not be noticed – additional symptoms can be:
  - Fever;
  - Swollen lymph glands;
  - Sore throat;
  - Patchy hair loss;
  - Headaches;
  - Weight loss;
  - Muscle aches; and
  - Fatigue
  - If you receive treatment during this stage, you will not move into the latent stage.
- **Latent Stage:** The latent stage of syphilis is a stage where there are no visible signs or symptoms. Left untreated, you can continue to have an active syphilis infection for years.
- **Tertiary Stage:** While most people with untreated syphilis do not advance to this stage, it does happen and can impact multiple organ symptoms including the heart, the brain, and the nervous system. This stage can occur 10–30 years after your initial infection and can result in death.

## Test Options

Often, testing will be conducted using a blood test. Certain cases might warrant testing of the fluid of a suspected syphilis sore.

## Treatment Options

The right antibiotic treatment can cure syphilis – it is important to complete the treatment plan your health practitioner provides entirely i.e. do not share your medication or take only a portion of the medication provided. Medication will stop the infection, however, it may not undo any permanent damage caused by the disease.