



Syphilis

What is Syphilis (“pox”)?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) usually caused by having unprotected sex (sex without a condom) with a person who is infected.

Both men and women can be infected. It can also be passed on during pregnancy from mother to child.

What are the symptoms?

The first sign of syphilis is usually a painless sore (Chancre), which appears where the infection has occurred; this is usually on the genitals or mouth. Sometimes the chancre may occur inside the vagina or anus where you don't notice it. The chancre will heal within 2-6 weeks even without treatment. However, the person will still have syphilis and need treatment.

After about 7-10 weeks the person will get what is known as secondary syphilis. They may feel unwell and feel like they have the flu. A rash on their hands, feet and other parts of the body may appear. They may also develop soft, moist warts on the warm, moist areas of the body (genitals, around the anus, under the breasts, armpits) or ulcers in the mouth or on the genitals. Secondary syphilis also will get better without treatment but the person will still have syphilis and still need treatment.

Syphilis can be spread by skin contact with the chancre, the warts and the ulcers and sometimes by contact with the rash.

Using a condom is an important way of preventing infection. But because not all of these things will be covered by the condom, it may not give 100% protection.

What other problems can it cause?

After the secondary syphilis heals, the person will feel fine and not know that they are carrying the infection. This is called the latent stage, where there are no visible signs of the illness.

However, without treatment, tertiary syphilis may develop between 5-30 years later. This can seriously affect the brain, spinal cord or heart and may lead to death.

Having syphilis can make it easier for a person to become infected with HIV or to pass HIV on to someone else.

What tests do you do?

Usually syphilis is diagnosed by having a blood test. Sometimes a swab may be taken from the chancre or a wart to look for the germ that causes syphilis.

Congenital Syphilis (baby born with syphilis)

If a pregnant woman has syphilis, her baby can be infected even if she does not have any symptoms herself. This can cause a miscarriage or stillbirth. Or it may cause problems with the baby's bones, skin, blood eyes, ears, teeth or brain. These problems may be present at birth or only appear after a few weeks or even years.

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Congenital syphilis is extremely easy to prevent by doing a blood test in all pregnant women and treating them (and their partners) if needed.

It is important that treatment for syphilis be completed and the person have a follow-up blood test to make sure the infection is completely cured.

What is the treatment?

Syphilis is usually treated with an injection of antibiotics.

Sexual partners need to be told so they can also be tested and treated so they don't pass the infection back.

Further fact sheets are available at:

http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc/fact_sheets/fact.shtml

For more information contact Clinic 34 in your area.

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