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### ▶ **What is syphilis?**

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*.

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### ▶ **How is syphilis spread?**

You can get syphilis:

- if you have unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex with an infected person
- very rarely through blood exchange

Note: If you are pregnant and have syphilis, it can be passed to your baby during pregnancy or while giving birth.

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### ▶ **How can I tell if I have syphilis?**

**Many people who have syphilis do not have any visible signs of infection. You can pass syphilis to someone else without even knowing it.**

When the bacteria enter the body, the disease goes through four stages. Symptoms may appear 10 – 90 days after sexual contact with an infected person.

The **primary stage**: a small, firm, round, painless sore (or sores), called a chancre(s), appear on the penis, rectum, vagina, or mouth, (where syphilis entered the body). Many people do not notice the sore because it is painless and goes away within a few weeks. Without treatment the infection will continue to the next stage.

The **secondary stage**: usually occurs after the chancre disappears or is almost gone.

You may have: a rash fever, tiredness, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches. These symptoms may disappear without treatment. But, the infection continues.

The **latent stage** is a period of time where there are no symptoms. It may last less than a year (early latent), or for many years (late latent).

The **tertiary stage** may occur one or more years after the initial infection. Tertiary syphilis may affect other body systems causing serious heart, brain, nerve, organ or bone diseases.

Babies of pregnant women infected with syphilis may be at risk for stillbirth (born dead) or serious health problems after birth, depending on how long the woman was infected.

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### ▶ **Is there a test for syphilis?**

A blood test is done to show the presence of the infection. If a chancre is found, testing of it can be done.

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### ▶ **How is syphilis treated?**

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages

- Early treatment will prevent serious complications and will reduce the chance of spreading the infection to others.
- The best treatment is with a penicillin injection. There is another antibiotic for those with penicillin allergy. It is important to finish the medication.
- Treatment will kill the bacteria and prevent further damage but it will not repair damage already done.
- It is important to tell your sex partner(s) that you have syphilis so they can be treated at the same time.
- It is important to NOT have sex until you and your sex partner(s) have completed treatment and had follow-up blood tests to avoid re-infection.

Even though you have been treated and cured, future syphilis blood tests remain “positive” for life.

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### ▶ **Is follow-up necessary?**

You can expect to be contacted by a public health nurse from the health unit who will talk with you about the treatment, your sex partner(s) and how to prevent future infection.

Blood tests after treatment are very important to show that the treatment worked. Your health care provider will talk to you about this. HIV testing is advised because syphilis increases your HIV risk. Follow-up is more frequent if you have both infections.

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### ▶ **How do I protect myself and others?**

Talk with your partner and make informed decisions BEFORE having sex and plan to:

- abstain or limit your number of sex partners
- ask your partners to be tested before you have sex
- always use condoms or barriers for vaginal, oral and anal sex
- get an STI check-up—especially if either of you have had more than one sex partner or think you have an infection
- get immunized for hepatitis B and Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
- consider the effect that alcohol and drug use can have on sexual decision-making

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### ▶ **Are there any special concerns about syphilis?**

- You can get syphilis more than once
- Syphilis increases the risk of getting and giving HIV
- There is an increase in the rate of syphilis in men having sex with men.

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▶ **Who can I talk to if I have more questions?**

If you have concerns or questions, call and ask for Sexual Health, or visit the health unit website below.



**simcoe  
muskoka**  
DISTRICT HEALTH UNIT

Tel: 705-721-7520  
Toll free: 1-877-721-7520  
[www.simcoemuskokahealth.org](http://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org)

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▶ **References:**

[Canadian Guidelines On Sexually Transmitted Infections](#)

[Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

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