



*WHAT IS*

# **Syphilis?**

**Identifying, treating  
and preventing this  
sexually transmitted  
infection**



## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. Syphilis can be easily treated and cured with antibiotics. If it is not treated, it can lead to serious health complications.

## How do you get it?

Syphilis is a type of infection. You can catch it through having sex or any sexual contact (oral, vaginal, or anal) with someone who has syphilis. It can be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby, and can cause a miscarriage, a still-birth, or syphilis infection in the baby if the mother is not treated.

## How do I know if I have syphilis?

It is possible to have syphilis, but not have any signs or symptoms. If you do have signs or symptoms, they will depend on the stage of the infection. There are three stages of infection, which you can read about on the next page. People in the first two stages of syphilis are infectious during sexual contact.

You can have syphilis without having any symptoms, which is why sexually active people should have a regular blood test to check if they have it. All pregnant women (even if they've never had any symptoms) should be tested during their pregnancy.

## Primary stage

Signs can appear about 3 weeks after becoming infected with syphilis. The first sign of syphilis is usually a sore or ulcer. It can last for 3–6 weeks. It can be:

- on the genitals, anus, or mouth
- painless
- hard to see.

The sore will eventually heal, even without treatment. However, even if the sore has healed, you can still pass syphilis on to other people.

## Secondary stage

Signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis can appear while first stage syphilis sores are still healing, or a long time after the sores have healed. The most common sign is a red or brown spotty rash, usually on your hands and feet, which can last for six months. Other signs and symptoms include:

- swollen lymph glands (neck, armpits, groin)
- high temperature
- hair loss
- muscle and joint pain
- headaches
- tiredness
- warty growths in skin folds, especially in the genital or anal areas.

## Tertiary (late) stage

Late stage syphilis happens years after the initial infection. It can damage your heart, brain, nerves, eyes, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints.

These symptoms will only occur if syphilis is not treated.

## How can I treat it?

Syphilis is easily treated with antibiotics, usually penicillin. You need to get treatment even if your symptoms go away on their own, otherwise you can pass syphilis on to other people. How long you'll have to take antibiotics depends on the stage of syphilis. You'll need to take follow-up blood tests to check that the treatment has worked. Even after you've been treated, it's possible to get syphilis again in the future.

## Who should I tell?

If you find out you have syphilis, you need to tell anyone you've had sex with (including oral sex) in the last six months. They need to see their doctor to get tested and treated. Don't have sex if you or your partner(s) think you might have syphilis.

## Can you prevent it?

You can lower your chances of catching syphilis and other STIs by using a condom correctly.

### **Important information**

- Cover your penis with the condom before it touches your partner's vagina, mouth, or anus.
- Use a new and lubricated condom each time you have sex.
- Only use condoms that haven't expired (check the expiry date on the packet).
- Open the packet carefully to avoid tearing the condom.

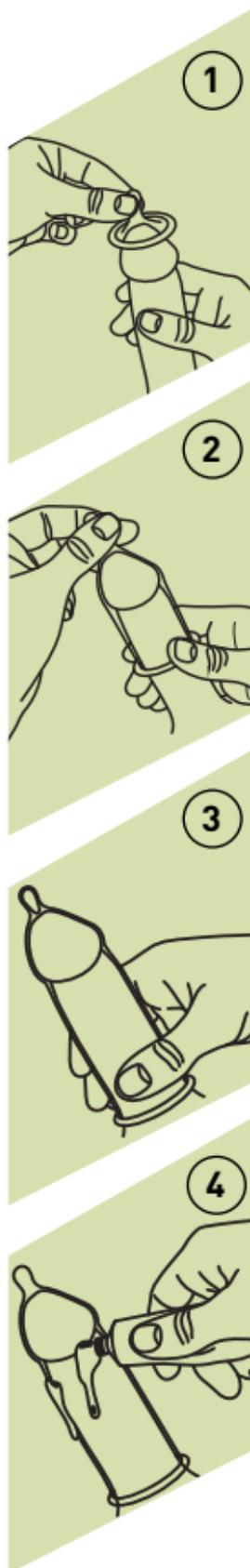
Have regular sexual health checks, especially if you have a new partner or have multiple partners. Don't have sex if you or your partner(s) think you might have syphilis.

Use condoms or avoid having sex until 7 days after you and your partner(s) have finished treatment.

# How to use a condom

## Follow these steps

- Before the condom touches the penis, check the condom is the right way up (figure 1).
- Do this by pinching the top of the condom and rolling it down a little. It should roll down easily (figure 2).
- Continue pinching the top of the condom and roll it onto the hard penis, all the way down to the base (figure 3).
- Apply a water-based lubricant to the condom (figure 4). Do not use oil-based lubricants, like Vaseline®, as they can damage the condom.
- After ejaculating (cumming) and then withdrawing, hold the condom onto the base of the penis to stop semen from spilling. Carefully remove the condom from the penis and wrap it in tissue or toilet paper. Put it in the rubbish.



## More information

You can get more information about syphilis and other STIs from:

- your doctor or nurse
- the public health nurse at your school
- Student Health Services at your university, polytechnic or school
- youth health clinics in your area
- Sexual Health Services – for clinics in your area, visit [www.nzshs.org/clinics](http://www.nzshs.org/clinics)
- Family Planning – for clinics in your area, call (free) 0800 INFOLINE (0800 4636 5463) or visit [www.familyplanning.org.nz](http://www.familyplanning.org.nz)
- Just the Facts website, visit <https://www.justthefacts.co.nz/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis/>

Read the following leaflets (available from your health provider and the HealthEd website [www.healthed.govt.nz](http://www.healthed.govt.nz)):

- *Chlamydia: Information Guide*. Code HP4609
- *What is Gonorrhoea?* Code HE1442
- *What is Genital Herpes?* Code HE1443
- *What are Genital Warts?* Code HE1444
- *Should I Have a Sexual Health Check?* Code HE1445
- *Being Safer Sexually*. Code HE7002
- *A Compact Guide to Sexual Health*. Code HE1438.

## Remember

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Common signs of syphilis include sores or ulcers (on genitals, anus or mouth) or a red or brown spotty rash on your hands or feet. The sore may be painless and hidden from view so may not be noticed.

If you have signs, or if you have unprotected sex with casual partners, visit your doctor, your student health or youth clinic or a Sexual Health Services or Family Planning clinic. You will need a blood test to confirm if you have syphilis.

Syphilis is easily treated with antibiotics. If left untreated, syphilis can cause serious health problems.

If you have syphilis, you need to tell anyone that you have had sexual contact with in the past six months. They need testing and treatment.

Use condoms or avoid having sex until seven days after you and your partner(s) have finished treatment.

To help protect against syphilis and other STIs, always use a condom when having sex. It is especially important to use condoms if you are having casual sex, sex with multiple partners, or do not know the STI status of your partner(s).

Get regular STI checks, even if you do not have signs of syphilis.



New Zealand Government



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