



Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by *Treponema pallidum*. This organism is a type of bacterium known as a spirochete. Syphilis is easily treated, but can have serious complications if not treated soon after infection.

Both men and women can have syphilis, and it can be passed from an infected pregnant woman to her unborn infant.

In the South Australian community, syphilis occurs more commonly in Aboriginal people or people who have been sexually active overseas.

Symptoms

Syphilis occurs in three stages. In stages one and two a person is infectious during sexual contact.

Primary syphilis

The first stage shows as a hard, usually painless, sore on the genitals, mouth or other point of sexual contact (sometimes hands or anus). This sore usually appears three to four weeks after infection, but it can appear any time between ten and ninety days after infection. It normally heals completely within four weeks. Even though the symptoms disappear without treatment, the person is infectious.

Secondary syphilis

During the second stage there may be a flat, red skin rash, hair loss, fever, lumps on the genitals or general tiredness. These symptoms may appear two to four months after infection and last for several weeks. If not treated, they often come back. The rash can be over the whole body, and is very contagious.

An infected (but untreated) person may remain infectious through sexual contact for up to two years.

Late syphilis

The third stage occurs in about one third of untreated individuals. It may show as severe complications in the brain or heart. This stage is not infectious.

Transmission

During infectious stages, syphilis can be highly contagious. The condition is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact with an affected area. Sores develop on the site that has touched the infectious area. Depending on the type of sexual contact, sores may therefore appear on or near the genitals, lips, fingers or anus.

Diagnosis and treatment

Blood tests are used to detect syphilis infection.

There are two tests available:

1. Testing for past infection (several different tests can be performed). The results of these tests are positive in people who have been exposed to syphilis previously. These tests can remain reactive for life, so a positive result does not necessarily mean you currently have syphilis. Some people with a positive result are not aware they have had syphilis before.
2. The RPR test can detect current infection. It shows the activity of syphilis in the body. This test can be used to diagnose active syphilis infection, and to monitor the effect of treatment. (The level falls following successful treatment)

It can be difficult to interpret the results of syphilis blood tests. Sometimes the tests need to be repeated. If there is any uncertainty regarding the result, you should discuss it with an experienced doctor.

Treatment

A penicillin injection is very effective treatment. Sometimes you need more than one dose, even though the symptoms improve after the first dose. It is important to follow your doctor's instructions regarding follow-up.

Other treatments are available if a person is allergic to penicillin.



Syphilis

Sexually Transmitted Diseases Services

Royal Adelaide Hospital

Free and confidential advice, testing and treatment for all STDs including HIV/AIDS

No appointment necessary

Monday, Thursday & Friday

10am – 4.30pm

Tuesday & Wednesday

11.00am - 6.30pm

1st floor
275 North Terrace
Adelaide 5000

Telephone

08 8222 5075

Toll free country call
1800 806 490

email

std.services@health.sa.gov.au

web site

www.stdservices.on.net

clinic

Follow-up

After treatment, regular blood tests are done to check that the infection has been cured. Do not have sex until the follow-up test is clear.

Recent sex partners need to be tested and treated.

Prevention

Use condoms during sex. Used properly, a condom will reduce the risk of infection.

If you have syphilis, do not have sex until treatment is finished and a blood test confirms that the condition has been treated successfully.

More Information

STD Services web site:

www.stdservices.on.net/std/syphilis

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