Syphilis

What is it?
How is it transmitted?
How is it treated?
What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. It is becoming more common and if left untreated it can cause very serious health problems in both men and women.

How is syphilis transmitted?

- From one person to another by oral, anal and vaginal sex
- By direct skin to skin contact with someone who has syphilis sores or a syphilis rash
- Pregnant women can pass the infection on to their unborn babies
- By injecting drug users who share needles
- It can be passed on before symptoms are noticeable, or after they’ve disappeared

What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

Symptoms may be mild and you may not even notice them.

Without treatment, the symptoms of syphilis develop in three stages:

**Stage 1 (primary syphilis)** – symptoms of syphilis begin with a painless but highly infectious sore on the genitals, or sometimes around the mouth. If anyone else comes into close contact with the sore, the person can also become infected. The sore lasts two to six weeks and then disappears.

**Stage 2 (secondary syphilis)** – secondary symptoms then develop. These could be:

- a non-itchy skin rash appearing anywhere on the body, but commonly on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet
- small skin growths, often mistaken for genital warts – on the vulva in women and around the anus in men and women
- flu-like symptoms – tiredness, headaches, joint pains, fever etc
• swollen lymph glands (e.g. in the neck or groin)
• weight loss
• hair loss

These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks. Syphilis then can move into a ‘latent’ phase and there may be no symptoms for years, but the infection is still present.

**Stage 3 (tertiary syphilis)** – around a third of people who are not treated for syphilis will develop tertiary syphilis. At this stage, it can cause serious damage to the body such as stroke, dementia, loss of co-ordination, numbness, paralysis, blindness, deafness, heart disease, skin rashes and finally death.

**What is the test for syphilis?**

The doctor or nurse will examine your genitals. For men, this involves looking at the penis, foreskin and urethra. For women, it involves an internal examination of the vagina. Both men and women may also have their anus examined. If sores are present, a swab (similar to a cotton bud) will be used to take a small sample of fluid from the sore. This is then examined for syphilis.

A clinician may also check your body for any rashes or growths and examine your mouth and throat.

After the examination, you will have a blood test for syphilis. The results should be available in 7 to 10 days.
What is the treatment for syphilis?

Primary and secondary syphilis can be successfully treated with a single dose of penicillin, given as an injection in the buttock (if allergic to penicillin a different antibiotic in tablet form can be given).

Later stages of the disease need to be treated with three penicillin injections, given at weekly intervals.

What happens if syphilis is not treated?

If not treated serious illness or death can occur.

Can I still have sex?

It is advised not to have vaginal, anal or oral sex and to avoid skin contact with partner(s) until treatment is finished.

Should I tell my partner(s)?

If you are told that you have syphilis then it is a good idea for your current and most recent sexual partner(s) to have a test to see if they have the infection. Sexual Health Sheffield will help with this and your confidentiality is protected.

How can I protect myself from syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections?

The following measures can help to protect you from syphilis and most other sexually transmitted infections, such as genital warts, chlamydia and gonorrhoea. If you have a sexually transmitted infection they will also help prevent you from passing it on to your partner(s):

- Use condoms every time you have vaginal or anal sex
- If you have oral sex, use a condom to cover the penis, or a dam to cover the anus or female genitals
• Any genital to genital contact between partners could pass on STIs. Using dams or condoms before sexual contact can prevent help infection
• If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk
• Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash or sterilise them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them
• Arrange regular HIV/STI check-ups, especially at change/start of relationships with new sexual partner

What happens at Sexual Health Sheffield?

When you attend for your appointment, you will be asked to provide the following:

• Your name and how we can contact you - any details you provide will be treated confidentially
• During your visit you will be asked personal information so we can provide the relevant and appropriate care
• We have a duty of care to all our patients, so if you are 17 or under you will be asked relevant questions to assess your safety. If staff are concerned, they may talk to you about what to do about this and may contact other appropriate agencies. Sexual Health Sheffield will not tell your parents or carers that you have visited Sexual Health Sheffield
This is the service you can expect when you attend Sexual Health Sheffield:

- All advice, information, tests, condoms and treatments are free at Sexual Health Sheffield
- No one should judge you because of your sexual behaviour or lifestyle
- All our services are confidential
- All Sexual Health Sheffield workers are appropriately and fully trained NHS staff
- All tests are optional; no examination will take place without your permission
- Please ask questions to ensure you fully understand what services have been offered, what tests carried out and what treatments given
- You can have a chaperone to help you feel more comfortable – please ask
- Our friendly and professional staff are here to help you. We will give you as much support as you need (particularly if you need help on how to inform any partners)

If you feel that we have not met the above or want to give us any other feedback, please contact us via www.sth.nhs.uk/patients/tell-us-what-you-think

Further information

www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk
0114 226 8888

NHS Choices website:
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis/