

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium (germ) *Treponema Pallidum*.

A pregnant woman with syphilis can pass it on to her unborn child, sometimes causing birth defects or death.

What are the symptoms?

Not everyone infected with syphilis will have symptoms. You can have syphilis and not know about it. Without treatment, Syphilis progresses in four stages:

SYPHILIS TYPES	SYMPTOMS
Primary syphilis <i>Contagious</i>	Three to 90 days after contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A sore (chancre or ulcer) will appear where the germ entered the body, mainly in the vagina, penis, anus and rectum or on the lips and in the mouth. A sore is firm, round and small. It is painless so it may go unnoticed. The sore may be mistaken for genital trauma or genital herpes. The sore can heal without treatment, but the disease will still progress to stage 2.
Secondary syphilis <i>Contagious</i>	Two weeks to six months after contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sore may still be present or may have healed. A rash may appear as rough, red, or reddish brown spots and can be present on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Other possible symptoms: fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, weight loss and muscle and joint aches. Without treatment, the disease progresses to stage 3.
Latent syphilis <i>Contagious in early stage</i>	Duration varies from months to years <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hidden stage with no symptoms. Damage begins to the internal organs.
Tertiary syphilis <i>Not contagious</i>	10 to 30 years after contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infection stays in the body for years. Serious health problems can occur if not found in the early stages.

How is syphilis spread?

- Syphilis is mostly spread by having unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex with an infected person.
- The bacteria enter the body through the tissues that line the throat, nose, rectum, and vagina.
- Direct (usually intimate) contact with lesions of primary and secondary syphilis poses the greatest risk of transmission.
- Close contact with an infected person's genitals, mouth, or rectum can cause exposure to the infection.
- Pregnant women can pass this infection to an unborn child or at the time of delivery.
- Although much less common, it may also be spread by sharing contaminated drug equipment or through broken skin.
- Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, shared clothing or eating utensils.
- After one year of being infected with syphilis, most people will no longer spread the infection.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

- Syphilis is diagnosed through a medical examination and blood test.
- Public Health recommends that all sexually active New Brunswickers are tested regularly for all sexually transmitted diseases at the same time. When you “test for one, test for all” you will be tested for gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis, the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and HIV/AIDS.

How is syphilis treated?

- Syphilis can be cured and should be treated immediately with antibiotics, usually penicillin by injections.
- After treatment is finished, you must have blood tests to make sure the infection is gone.
- Avoid unprotected sexual activities that may put you at risk for re-infection until you and your partner(s) have completed treatment and have been told the infection is gone.

What happens if syphilis is left untreated?

- Untreated syphilis can spread and cause damage to your brain, heart, bones and many other organs in the body and in severe cases may cause paralysis, blindness, dementia and even death.
- Pregnant women can pass it to an unborn child, sometimes causing birth defects or death (stillbirth). Skin, bones, teeth, eyes, lymph glands, liver, spleen and brain can be affected. Symptoms can show soon after birth or later in life of a child.
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You are at risk of getting syphilis if you have sex with an infected partner or:

- Those who have multiple sexual partners.
- Injection drug users or one of their partners.
- Sex trade workers or one of their partners.
- Someone who has had an STI.

How can syphilis be prevented?

Individuals who are sexually active should:

- Limit the number of sexual partners and avoid sex with people whose sexual history is unknown.
- Always use condoms when having sex (vaginal, oral, or anal) or a dental dam (a sheet of latex).
- Avoid the use of alcohol and other drugs that might cloud thinking and lead to high-risk behavior.

What is the public health response?

- If you are diagnosed with syphilis, your health-care provider will treat you and give you information on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections.
- A Public Health Nurse may contact you to support you in contacting your partners.

It may be necessary to test all your sexual contacts of up to one year before the disease was detected in you.

- Your long-term partners and children may also need to be tested in some circumstances.

All discussions are strictly confidential

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, Tele-Care 811, local Public Health office or visit the [government of New Brunswick website](#).