

Feelings

People who learn they have syphilis sometimes feel guilty, depressed, anxious or angry.

Talk with your doctor, a counsellor or others who have the same problem. Psychologists and counsellors are available at the sexual health clinics. Whatever you say to them will be kept private.

Where to go

Confidential tests and treatment are available from your GP or a doctor of your choice or you could visit one of these metropolitan health services.

(Most are free, please telephone first to see if you need an appointment.):

Fremantle Hospital

Infectious Diseases, B2 Clinic, Alma Street,
FREMANTLE

☎ 9431 2149

Royal Perth Hospital

Sexual Health Clinic, 48 Murray Street,
PERTH

☎ 9224 2178

FPWA-Sexual Health Services

70 Roe Street,
NORTHBRIDGE

☎ 9227 6177 or

☎ 1800 198 205 – free call from a land line only

Quarry Health Centre (For under 25s)

170 Aberdeen Street,
NORTHBRIDGE

☎ 9227 1444

Women's Health and Family Services

227 Newcastle Street,
NORTHBRIDGE

☎ 6330 5400 or

☎ 1800 998 399 – free call from a land line only

Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service

156 Wittenoom Street,
PERTH

☎ 9421 3888

And some regional Population Health Units and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services.

For more information contact

Sexual Health Helpline

☎ 9227 6178 (Metropolitan callers) or

☎ 1800 198 205 (Country callers

– free call from a land line only)

healthdirect Australia

☎ 1800 022 222

www.public.health.wa.gov.au

www.getthefacts.health.wa.gov.au

Regional Population Health Units

(those in bold provide clinical services)

Albany

9842 7500

Broome

9194 1630

Bunbury

9781 2350

Carnarvon

9941 0515

Geraldton

9956 1985

Kalgoorlie-Boulder

9080 8200

Northam

9622 4320

South Hedland

9172 8333

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

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Syphilis

Your
sexual
health

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a very serious disease that can affect your brain and other organs. It's caused by the *Treponema Pallidum* bacteria and is spread by unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex. Syphilis is easy to cure if found early.

Signs and Symptoms

The first signs of syphilis don't last long, so you can have it and pass it on without knowing. Some people get an ulcer or sore around the genital area or mouth, three to 12 weeks after infection. The sore can be any size or shape. It's usually painless, doesn't bleed, and feels like a hard button on the skin.

If you have any of these symptoms – or if you are having sex with several people and don't know if they have an infection – **visit a doctor as soon as possible and ask for a check-up.**

If not treated, the sore heals and disappears after a few weeks. But you are still infected, and the bacteria are in the bloodstream and spreading around the body (the primary stage).

Two to six months after getting infected, you can develop a skin rash on the face, palms, and soles of the feet, swollen glands, lumps around the moist areas of the body, and hair loss. You can also get headaches, and pains in the bones, muscles and joints. This secondary stage can last for six months or more.

Without treatment, there is a latent stage where there are no visible signs but the person is still infectious and can pass on syphilis through sex for up to two years.

If you have untreated syphilis for over two years, the disease can affect the brain, heart, large blood vessels, the spinal cord, skin and bones, leading to disability and death (tertiary stage).

If a pregnant woman has syphilis, her baby can be born dead or damaged (congenital syphilis). If found early in the pregnancy, syphilis can be treated, lessening damage to the baby. All women should have a syphilis test in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy or at the first antenatal visit.

Checking it out

Your doctor will do a blood test for syphilis. It's a good idea to get tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STI) such as chlamydia and HIV, at the same time.

If you do have syphilis, all your sex partners will need to be checked. This is always done carefully, respecting everyone's confidentiality.

Treatment

Syphilis is treated with penicillin or other antibiotics. You need to take the full course, and not miss any doctor's appointments.

After treatment, you'll need a blood test to make sure you are cured.

Syphilis is very infectious, particularly during the primary and secondary stages. **If you think you could have syphilis or are having treatment, don't have sex, even with a condom, until your doctor says it's OK.**

Protecting yourself and your partner

The safest ways to protect against syphilis and other STIs are to:

- **Always use condoms with water-based lubricant or dental dams.** Condoms and dental dams are the best way of protecting you both against syphilis and some other STIs. Always use a condom with water-based lubricant or dental dam until you are totally sure that both you and your partner do not have an STI.
- **Have a long-term relationship** where neither of you is already infected, and neither of you have other partners.
- **Limit your sex partners.** The fewer people you have sex with, the lower the risk of having sex with someone who has syphilis.
- **Have regular STI check-ups.**

Talking about STIs can be difficult, but any person you have sex with has a right to know if you have an STI. Discuss it when you are feeling relaxed and confident, not just before you have sex. Your partner will appreciate your honesty and that you don't want to infect him/her. You have the right to know if they are infected, too.

If you think you might have been exposed to syphilis, have a check-up at a doctor's surgery or at any of the places listed at the end of this pamphlet.

Early treatment will cure the infection and stop it spreading.