

# Syphilis (SIF-uh-luhss)

## What is Syphilis?

- Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*.

## How is Syphilis spread?

- Syphilis is spread from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore.
- Transmission occurs during vaginal, oral or anal sex.
- Syphilis can be spread from mother to her baby during pregnancy or delivery.
- Genital sores from syphilis make it easier to spread Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (both passing it on and acquiring it).

## What will decrease the risk of getting Syphilis?

- The surest way to prevent all STIs is to abstain from any sexual contact or to have sex with one partner who has been tested for STIs and is not infected (mutually monogamous).
- Use condoms each time you have sex (including oral, anal and vaginal sex) although not all sores may be covered by the condom.
- Limit the number of sexual partners you have.

## How is Syphilis diagnosed?

- Through a blood test.
- Because of the risks for an unborn baby, all pregnant women should be tested for syphilis.

## How is Syphilis treated?

- An injection of a special form of penicillin (antibiotic) is used to treat syphilis.
- More than one dose may be needed in a pregnant woman, if syphilis is in the late stages or if the person is also infected with HIV.

## What are the signs and symptoms of Syphilis?

- Primary Stage (the first stage)
  - A painless sore called a chancre (“shanker”) will appear 10-90 days after infection occurs.
  - The chancre is usually firm, round, small and painless.
  - The sore appears where the bacteria enters the body such as the vagina, penis, mouth or anus and may not be noticed.
  - Symptoms may be mild.
  - Symptoms may go away without treatment, but the infection will progress to the secondary stage.
- Secondary Stage (the second stage)
  - Starts two to four months after becoming infected and lasts for several weeks.
  - Starts with a non-itchy rash.
  - The rash may appear as rough, red or reddish brown spots on the palms of the hands and bottoms of the feet.
  - Rashes with a different appearance may occur on other parts of the body.
  - Other symptoms may be fever, swollen glands, sore throat, hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches and tiredness.
  - The signs and symptoms will resolve without treatment, but the disease will progress to latent and possibly late stages of the disease.
- Latent and Late Stages
  - Begins when the symptoms of the secondary stage disappear.
  - There are no signs or symptoms (latent stage), but the disease may begin to damage the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints.
- Symptoms may appear 10 to 20 years after infection (late stage) and may include difficulty in coordinating muscle movements, gradual blindness, dementia, and may result in death.

## What are the long-term complications of Syphilis?

- It can damage the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints.
- Syphilis in a pregnant woman can lead to miscarriage, serious birth defects and possible death of the newborn.

## Who is at risk of getting Syphilis?

- Those who use alcohol and/or drugs (including injection drug use) because this may lead to risky sexual behaviour.
- Those who have more than one sexual partner.
- Those who have unprotected sexual contact (oral, anal or vaginal).
- Those who have had sex with someone known to be infected with syphilis.
- Recent outbreaks in Saskatchewan have noted increased risks for:
  - Men who have sex with men
  - Sex trade workers
  - Anonymous partnering (for example, finding sexual partners online)
  - Those in circumstances that limit the ability to make healthy decisions about sex (for example, exchange of sex for money or drugs)

For more information contact your local public health office, your physician, nurse practitioner, HealthLine at 811. OR the following sexual health clinics:

Saskatoon Sexual Health Program  
#100 – 310 Idylwyld Drive North  
SASKATOON, SK S7L 0Z2  
*To speak with a nurse Mon-Fri, 9 am -12 pm*  
Phone: 306-655-4642

Regina STD Clinic  
2110 Hamilton Street  
REGINA, SK S4P 2E3  
Phone: 306-766-7788

Prince Albert Parkland Sexual Health Clinic  
101 15<sup>th</sup> Street East  
PRINCE ALBERT, SK S6V 1G1  
Phone: 306-765-6540

Battlefords Sexual Health Clinic  
Rm. 104, 1192 – 101 Street  
NORTH BATTLEFORD, SK S9A 0Z6  
Phone: 306-937-6846

Meadow Lake Sexual Health Services  
218 Centre St.  
MEADOW LAKE, SK S9X 1L6  
Phone: 306-236-5661

*References: Syphilis, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services; Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections, Syphilis (January 2013); Red Book (2012).*