

Syphilis

Information for patients



Syphilis is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*. It is becoming an increasingly common infection in Scotland with 455 new cases in 2018.

How can I catch syphilis?

Syphilis is caught by having unprotected sex with someone who has syphilis. This includes oral sex (including rimming), vaginal and anal sex. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

What are the signs of syphilis?

In many people there are no signs of syphilis, and the infection can only be discovered by having a blood test.

In other people, an ulcer appears where the bacteria have entered the body – usually on the penis, in the vagina, in the anus, or in the mouth. The ulcer is usually painless and appears about a month after being infected with syphilis.

If syphilis is not treated at this stage, the ulcer heals in a few weeks. Sometimes people go on to develop the signs of the secondary stage of syphilis several months later:

- A skin rash all over the body, including the palms and soles
- Swollen glands in the neck, armpits, and groin
- Ulcers or warty growths around the anus, genitals or in the mouth
- Mild fever and tiredness.

These signs of secondary syphilis can come and go for about a year, and then disappear altogether. This does not mean the infection has gone, and throughout this time you could pass the infection on to people you have sex with, or, if you are a pregnant woman, to your unborn child.

If syphilis is not treated it can cause damage to the nervous system-brain, spinal cord, eyes and also to the heart and other organs. These complications usually take years to develop and are rare in the UK because the treatment works so well.

How can you tell if someone has syphilis?

The only sure way of knowing is by taking a blood test.

Can syphilis be treated?

Yes, syphilis is completely curable, and treated people are not at risk of getting complications or of infecting their sexual partners or babies.

Syphilis is treated with penicillin by injection. The number of injections needed depends on how long you have been infected. Early infection needs one injection. Late infection needs 3 injections in total at weekly intervals.

If you know that you are allergic to penicillin, it is important to tell the medical staff and another antibiotic will be used for treatment.

Herxheimer reaction

Many people who are treated for syphilis will become unwell six to eight hours after the penicillin injection is given. They often complain of a headache, muscle pain, and a temperature.

This happens because the syphilis bacteria has been killed by the antibiotic and is being cleared from the body. If you get this reaction, it means the treatment is working, but it can be worrying if you are not expecting it. You will feel completely normal again in 24 hours.

Most people will find it is helpful to take paracetamol if they develop this reaction

What happens after I am treated?

The treatment will clear the infection which means that you will remain well and will not be infectious to others. However, in order to ensure that you have had a good response to treatment, we will need to monitor you over the next 12 months.

This means that you will need blood tests on three or four occasions over the next 12 months. To do this we can send you a Home Sampling Kit (HSK) or organise a booked appointment for you in Chalmers or one of our local clinics if there is one near you. If it is easier you can go to your GP.

The first blood test will be three months after treatment. This test shows if the treatment has worked correctly.

The test for syphilis will be positive for the rest of your life, showing you have had the infection and cleared it. For this reason you should not give blood to the blood transfusion services as they will not be able to use it.

What about my partner?

As syphilis is an STI, it is important that your sexual partner is tested for syphilis and other infections. If you have had other sexual partners in the past, some of these may also need to be tested. We will advise you as to who will need testing.

You must not have sex again until both you and your partner have been treated.

If you do not have a regular partner wait at least 2 weeks after you have received your treatment before having sex with anyone.

Plan:

We will text you before your appointments/HSK is due to remind you.

If you do not complete the blood tests, we will text you once to remind you that you have missed your appointment/not completed your HSK. You should make an appointment/do the HSK as soon as possible. If you have moved from the area, have the blood tests done by your local sexual health clinic or GP. We can write to them with the information they need if you contact us.

We can see you for a blood test between 8.50am and 7pm Monday to Thursday and between 8.50am and 3.30 pm on a Friday. Please phone **0131 536 2108** to make your appointment.

Because it is so important for your long-term care that we know the result of your syphilis blood test at 12 months after treatment, we will contact your GP and ask them to do the test if you have not done it.

We will write to your GP at 12 months to inform them of your diagnosis and complete treatment for syphilis so that there is a record in your medical notes. This is important in case you have health problems at any point in the future and you are tested for syphilis.

How can I avoid getting syphilis?

Having been treated for syphilis does not mean that you are protected. You can be reinfected.

Using condoms for vaginal or anal sex and condoms or dental dams for oral sex, and ensuring that both you and any new partner have a sexual health screen before any condomless sex are the best ways to reduce the risk of getting syphilis again.

If you have any questions, or are not sure about anything, ask your doctor or pharmacist, or telephone **0131 536 1070**.

