

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Syphilis

Syphilis cases have increased quickly in British Columbia over recent years. We have developed this list of common questions our nurses get about syphilis infection in this FAQ resource.

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that can be passed between people during sexual activity.

How can I get Syphilis?

Syphilis can be passed during any kind of sexual activity with your mouth, vagina or anus. In some circumstances it can even be passed by deep kissing.

What should I know about Syphilis if I'm pregnant?

Check out the resources below for some great information about Syphilis in pregnancy, developed by the University of British Columbia:

- Supporting a Safe and Healthy Pregnancy Syphilis Resource: [Syphilis-Resource-Nov-2024.pdf](#)
- Maternal and Congenital Syphilis Resource List: [Linktree - Syphilis Resource List](#)

How would I know if I have Syphilis?

It is common to not notice any symptoms if you have syphilis. If you get symptoms, they can include:

- A rash on the chest, back, hands or feet
- A sore on your body that may look like a crater but isn't very painful.

The best way to know if you have syphilis is to get tested from either a blood test, or a swab taken from sores or rashes if you have them.

Syphilis goes through different stages in your body, from active (having symptoms) to inactive (no symptoms). You can pass Syphilis to someone else in either of these stages.

What is a False Positive Result?

There are three separate tests done for syphilis with your blood sample. Sometimes, a syphilis test can react to something in your system that is from a different infection or condition.

Sometimes, one (or two) tests can show a Positive result, while the other tests are Negative, or Non-Reactive. You will be asked to repeat the blood test in two weeks if this happens. If the result remained the same after the repeat test, it would be considered a False Positive result.

Is Syphilis curable?

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics called penicillin. Treatment is usually offered as an injection of a long-acting penicillin (Bicillin) into each hip or buttock muscle.

Why does my care provider want me to get treated for Syphilis even before I get my results back?

In some cases your care provider will know that there is a pretty high likelihood that you have Syphilis, even before you get test results back.

If you have been told by a sexual partner that they have Syphilis, or if you have a sore or a rash that looks suspicious, your provider will offer treatment at the same time as testing. This helps you to be cured more quickly and decrease the risk of passing it on to others.

What can I do to help decrease the discomfort with the injections?

You might experience discomfort or pain during or after injectable syphilis treatment. Some options to reduce this include:

- Take Acetaminophen and/or Ibuprofen about 30-45 minutes before treatment.
- Bring a support person with you to your appointment for treatment.
- Try to distract yourself during the treatment – feel free to use your phone to read or play a game.
- If you are lying face down for the treatment, point your toes inward to help relax the hip muscles.
- Try to move around as much as possible after the treatment – this will help the medication to move away from the injection site and decrease the discomfort.
- You can take another dose of Acetaminophen 4 hours later, or Ibuprofen 6 hours later.
- Apply ice soon after treatment (this will help to stop more swelling at the injection sites) and heat later in the day (this will help the swelling to move away from the injection sites)

How do I know how many partners to notify?

By looking at your test results, symptoms and medical history, your healthcare provider can get a good idea of how long you may have been infected with syphilis.

- If you are diagnosed with *Primary Syphilis*, you are considered to have been exposed within three months before your symptoms started. You would be asked to notify your partners in that time frame.
- If your diagnosis is *Secondary Syphilis*, partners from 6 months before your symptoms started should be notified.
- If you haven't had a Syphilis test within the last year, you will be asked to notify all partners from the last year to be notified.

If you are diagnosed with syphilis, all sexual partners from the last 3 months will be asked to get treatment as well as testing.

I was treated, but my partner was not. Can they reinfect me if they tested negative?

It can take up to 3 months after sexual contact for a blood test to show that someone has syphilis, so your partner could still have the infection even if they tested negative. This means that you could be reinfected if you have sex before they are treated.

Why is follow-up Syphilis testing important?

It is important to get syphilis blood testing every three to six months after treatment to make sure that the treatment was effective. Repeat blood testing for syphilis will also let us know if there is a new infection so it can be treated as quickly as possible.

After treatment your future blood tests will show that you have antibodies for syphilis, which is your body's memory of the infection. The number of antibodies should continue to go down over the next year or two.

Will my test results be negative if I had syphilis in the past?

After you have had syphilis, future blood tests will show that you have antibodies, which is your body's memory of the infection.

Your blood tests will show if you have a new infection or not. This is because each blood sample will have 3 tests performed on it to help get a full picture.