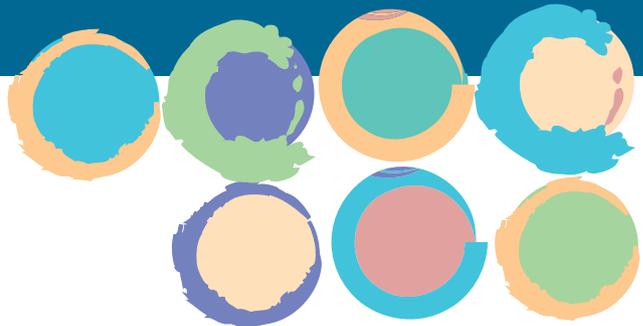


Syphilis

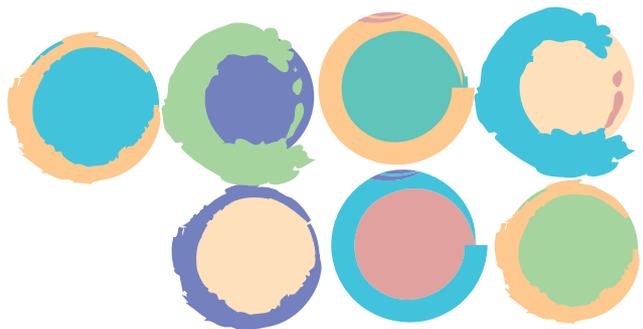
SANDYFORD

caring about sexual, reproductive and emotional health



www.sandyford.org

Telephone 0141 211 8130





What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexual infection caused by an organism called *Treponema pallidum*. A century ago syphilis was a very serious illness causing the deaths of many people, but today it is fully treatable once discovered. Syphilis commonly causes no symptoms. For that reason we offer a syphilis blood test to everyone attending our clinic.



How is syphilis transmitted?

Syphilis is passed on by any sexual contact, including oral sex. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn child, and from exposure to infected blood.

Some people are unaware that they have been infected and have no symptoms. They can transmit the infection to others unknowingly for up to 2 years after infection.



How common is syphilis?

Syphilis is still quite rare in the UK compared to countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. However, outbreaks have occurred in the last few years in cities like London, Manchester, Brighton and Dublin. Gay men seem to be most at risk, but heterosexual men and women have also been affected. Glasgow has not escaped and we have seen a steep rise in infectious syphilis here.

You are more likely to have syphilis if:

- You are a man who has ever had sex with another man
- You have ever had sex with people from countries where syphilis is common.
- Your mother was from a country where syphilis testing in pregnancy is not done.
- You have had a blood transfusion in a country where donated blood is not tested properly for syphilis

However, anyone who has ever had unprotected oral, anal or vaginal sex is potentially at risk.



What illness does syphilis cause?

Syphilis is divided into four disease stages.

Primary Stage

Around two to four weeks after becoming infected, one or more sores appear where the infection got into the body. These can be painless. The sores or chancres, are highly infectious and take up to six weeks to heal.

They can appear anywhere on the body but mainly:

- In women: on the vulva (lips of the vagina), the clitoris, around the opening of the urethra (water passage) and on the cervix (neck of the womb).
- In men: on the penis and foreskin
- In both men and women: around the anus and in the mouth.

Secondary Stage

If primary syphilis is not treated, up to 25% of people develop a secondary stage some six weeks to six months later. At this point, the syphilis organisms are spreading round the body, so sufferers can feel generally unwell.

Symptoms include:

- A non-itchy rash covering the whole body or appearing in patches, especially affecting the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.
- Flat, warty-looking growths on the vulva in women and around the anus and groin in both men and women.
- A flu-like illness, feeling tired, loss of appetite, swollen glands.
- White patches on the tongue or roof of the mouth.
- Patchy hair loss.
- loss of vision or hearing and headaches

When these symptoms are present syphilis is very infectious and may be sexually transmitted to a partner.

Latent Stage

If not treated, the syphilis organisms eventually go into hiding. Those affected feel completely well and have no physical signs of infection. This is called “latent syphilis”. This is a common stage for us to find the infection. Latent syphilis can only be found with a blood test.

Late Syphilis

If latent syphilis is not discovered and treated you may develop late syphilis. This can happen decades after first catching the infection. Syphilis can gradually damage and weaken the heart, blood vessels, brain and nerves, and cause skin growths. At this stage, treatment will arrest the infection but may not cure any damage.



How can I test for syphilis?

Syphilis is normally diagnosed by having a blood test. This is sent off to our local laboratory. Results take about two working days to return if negative.

If you have a genital or anal ulcer we can sometimes diagnose syphilis in the clinic straightaway with a special microscope. We also take swabs from any genital or anal ulcer using a special ‘PCR’ test for syphilis.



What if my test is positive?

We usually repeat the sample to make sure. Blood tests for syphilis come in two types. One looks for active syphilis (‘RPR test’) while the other can tell if you have ever been infected and remains positive for life. By looking at these tests and examining you the doctor can decide which stage of syphilis you are in. We will need to ask you about your previous sexual activity and any visits to clinics in the past.



What is the treatment?

Syphilis is best treated with injectable penicillin. This is the best tried treatment and the best way of avoiding the health problems of late syphilis. The course length may vary from one injection for early syphilis to daily injections for fourteen days for some types of late syphilis. This seems a long time, but shorter courses risk failure. If you miss an injection or risk re-infection during treatment you may have to start the course again. We will do all we can to make the process as easy as possible.

If you have a genuine allergy to penicillin, you will be offered alternative tablet treatment usually for two or four weeks. This is less reliable and more likely to lead to problems with syphilis later in life. It is really important to take every tablet. It is important that you complete the treatment, as if it is interrupted it may be necessary to start again from the beginning.

People starting treatment sometimes feel flu-like or unwell, especially if they have early syphilis. This is expected, and is due to all the syphilis organisms being killed by the antibiotics. We suggest taking regular paracetamol and resting, and to contact the clinic if symptoms are severe.



HIV Test

Because syphilis can be more serious if you have HIV infection, we recommend everyone diagnosed with syphilis to take an HIV test. Most people do take this advice. Our Sexual Health Advisers can give you more information.



Lifelong Sexual History

Because it is often impossible to tell how long you have had syphilis, the sexual health adviser will help you go through your lifetime sexual history. You may consider informing current and previous sexual partners so they can get tested. This is entirely within your control. Our sexual health adviser can help you with this process.



Follow up

If your blood test has shown active syphilis then we like to see you every three months until the test for active syphilis is negative or has fallen significantly and remained low. Some parts of the blood test will remain positive for life. If you ever have another syphilis test (e.g. for life insurance or in women because you are pregnant) then you may want to mention this.



Can I get re-infected?

Unfortunately, you can get re-infected with syphilis even if you have just finished treatment recently. Safer sex may help you avoid this risk.



Any special problems for women?

In the UK all pregnant women are offered tests for syphilis. Treatment must be given to prevent the infection spreading to the baby. Penicillin is quite safe to use in pregnancy. The earlier you have syphilis diagnosed and treated the less risk there is to the health of your baby.

Remember using condoms for every episode of sex will reduce the risk of contracting most sexually transmitted infections, including syphilis.



Sandyford

For an appointment contact: 0141 211 8130

For further information

contact the sexual health advisers on: **0141 211 8634**



If you would like this document in large print, Braille or audio format, please contact Sandyford Services on:

If you would like this document in another language, please contact:

如果您需要该信息的其它语言版本，请联系：

اگر این اطلاعات را به زبانی دیگر میخواهید لطفاً با این آدرس تماس بگیرید:

إذا رغبت في الحصول على هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال بـ:

ਜੇਕਰ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ:

اگر آپ یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں حاصل کرنا چاہتے ہیں تو براہ مہربانی رابطہ کریں:

Eğer bu bilgiyi bir başka dilde istiyorsanız lütfen bağlantı kurunuz:

Jeśli chcesz uzyskać te informacje w innym języku skontaktuj się z:



0141 211 8130

