

**Sexually Transmitted Diseases**



# Syphilis

**Questions and Answers**



Generalitat de Catalunya  
**Departament  
de Salut**

## What is syphilis?

It is an infection caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum* and is one of a group of infections that are transmitted from person to person through sexual contact.

The infection develops in stages. In the primary stage the symptoms are mild. The later, more severe stage of the disease is now very rare.

**Syphilis considerably increases the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS.** It represents a way for the HIV virus to enter and leave the body.

Since 2000, there has been a significant increase in the number of cases of syphilis in Catalonia.

## How is it transmitted?

- **Very easily during penetrative sex** (vaginal, anal) **and/or oral sex** (fellatio, cunnilingus) **through contact with syphilis lesions,** which are not always visible and are impregnated with treponema. These bacteria enter the mucous membranes (of the anus, vagina, penis, mouth) or even the skin, if it is broken by a scratch or wound.

Generally, an infected person who has not received treatment can transmit syphilis during the first year of infection.

- **From an infected mother to her foetus during pregnancy.** Without treatment, the risk of transmission is very high during the first two stages of syphilis. Although the risk decreases over time, it is still present for many years.



## What are the symptoms?

**Signs and symptoms of syphilis are not present in all stages** of the infection. Symptoms may appear days or months after the start of the infection and may be similar to those of other infections.

Signs and symptoms of syphilis include one or more **ulcers** on the genital organs, anus or mouth, **skin eruptions** over the entire body, **lesions in the mucous membranes, swollen glands, fever and general unwellness.**

These symptoms gradually and spontaneously disappear. However, the infection may persist and, after several years, lead to severe mental, movement, vision and heart disorders.

### In addition...

If a pregnant woman has syphilis she may miscarry or her **child** may be born **with severe malformations.**

## How can I find out if I have syphilis?

**A simple blood test** can be used to find out whether you are infected.

Laboratory tests identify antibodies in the blood that are produced when syphilis occurs. Usually, such tests are positive 4-6 weeks after infection.

The doctor will make a diagnosis on the basis of the test results and a physical examination.

## Can syphilis be cured?

Syphilis can be cured with **simple and effective antibiotic treatment.** Usually, one injection of penicillin is enough to cure the infection.

However, treatment does not protect against reinfection.

### In addition...

The **infected individual** must receive treatment as soon as possible. **His/her partners need to be informed,** and, if necessary, **treated.** This is the only way to avoid a chain of new infections.

## How can syphilis be prevented?

Unless both partners know that they are not infected, the risk of contracting syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases can be reduced as follows:

- **Use a condom whenever you have penetrative sex (vaginal, anal or oral-genital).** A dental dam (a sheet of latex) can be used during oral sex. Condom use considerably reduces the risk of syphilis transmission.
- If you have **signs of a sexually transmitted disease** (lesions of the skin or mucous membranes, particularly in the genital area, abnormal genital discharge or burning with urination) **avoid having sexual relations until you have consulted a healthcare professional**, who can evaluate these symptoms.
- **Avoid sexual relations when you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol**, as they reduce the perception of risk and could lead to unprotected sex or incorrect condom use.

### In addition...

- **Limiting the number of sexual partners** is also a preventative measure.
- If you are at risk of having been infected, you may need to **be tested for sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and HIV/AIDS**, even if you do not have any symptoms. Your healthcare professional will give you specific advice.
- **All pregnant women must be tested for syphilis in the first 3 months of the pregnancy.** An HIV test is also recommended. Treatment of an infected mother can prevent the infection from being transmitted to the foetus.

# Development of syphilis without treatment

Stage	Symptoms and signs
<b>Initial contact</b>	The bacteria enter the body, multiply at the point of entry and spread through the organism via the blood and the lymphatic system.
<b>After 3 weeks *</b>	
<b>Stage 1</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>A non-painful lesion (ulcer)</b> in the place of contact, which may be in the genital area (around or inside the vagina, on the outer labia or on the penis), on the anus or even on the mouth (due to oral sex). There may be more than one lesion.</li><li>• <b>Swollen lymph nodes</b> near the ulcer.</li></ul> <p>The initial lesion disappears spontaneously in a few weeks.</p>
<b>After 2-3 months *</b>	
<b>Stage 2</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Skin eruptions</b> (rashes or papules) all over the body, even on the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet. They are not usually itchy.</li><li>• Frequently, non-painful <b>lesions</b> (small ulcerations or grey patches) arise in the <b>mucous membranes</b> of the anus, genital organs, mouth or tongue.</li><li>• Sometimes, the lesions look like warts on the genitals.</li><li>• <b>Flu-like symptoms:</b> general unwellness, fever, sore throat.</li><li>• <b>Swollen lymph nodes</b> in the neck, armpit and groin.</li></ul> <p>These symptoms disappear spontaneously and gradually.</p> <p>There may be some reoccurrence of eruptions or unwellness, etc. in the first year of infection.</p>
<b>After 1 year *</b>	
<b>Latent stage</b>	There is no sign of the infection for several years or during the person's entire life.
<b>After 5-30 years *</b>	
<b>Stage 3</b> 	<p>Some people (30%) have damaged internal organs (heart, bones, brain, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heart failure</li><li>• Gradual loss of vision</li><li>• Mobility problems</li><li>• Psychiatric disorders or dementia</li></ul>

\*Usual time elapsed since first contact.

## Sexually Transmitted Diseases

### Don't forget that:

- An individual can be infected and not know about it.
- The use of condoms effectively reduces the risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection.
- Early diagnosis and treatment prevents most of the complications of sexually transmitted diseases.

If you have any doubts or if you think that your behaviour puts you at risk of infection, visit one of the public health system's health centres, sexual and reproductive health units or sexually transmitted disease units.

You can also call:

  
Sanitat Respon 24 hores  
**902 111 444**

**SIDA**  
**900 212222**  
Informació confidencial i gratuïta



[www.gencat.cat/salut](http://www.gencat.cat/salut)