

Factsheet

Women and Syphilis

Syphilis is a serious infection and more women in Australia are getting it. Learn more about syphilis and how you can protect yourself.



Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that is passed on from one person to another during sex.



More women aged 15 to 44 years old are getting it

Between 2016 and 2022 rates of infectious syphilis in women aged 15 to 44 years increased by 158 per cent in Australia*.



You might not know you have syphilis

Some people might not feel sick or know they have syphilis. It's possible to have syphilis and to pass it onto your partner without knowing it.

We recommended that you and your sexual partner get a full STI test regularly – even if you don't have any symptoms.

If you find out you have syphilis, let your sexual partner know so they can also get tested and treated. This will stop syphilis passing back to you or to others.



Syphilis symptoms are different from person to person

If you get syphilis, the first signs are sores or ulcers on the genitals, anus and mouth.

Over time other symptoms appear:

- Rashes
- Skin lesions
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Hair loss
- Muscle and joint aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue



Without treatment, syphilis can cause:

- Brain infections
- Dementia
- Lung and heart failure
- Blindness
- Death

*Australian Department of Health and Aged Care, (2023), National Notifiable Disease Surveillance System. Available at <https://nindss.health.gov.au/pbi-dashboard>

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Passing syphilis on to your baby can be fatal

If you have syphilis and are pregnant, you can pass the infection on to your baby before they are born.

This is known as congenital syphilis and it can cause:

- miscarriage
- stillbirth
- premature births
- low birthweight
- death of the baby shortly after birth

Congenital syphilis can cause permanent brain or organ damage to your baby. This can affect their growth and development.

Some babies may not show growth and development issues until they are older leading to a late diagnosis.



Getting a regular test can help you

We recommend that you get a full STI test regularly – even if you don't have any symptoms and especially if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.

Syphilis tests are important routine tests during pregnancy.

You will be tested at least two times during your pregnancy to prevent congenital syphilis. This is because there has been an increase in syphilis in the community. Another syphilis test might be done if you have a higher chance of getting it.

Visit your doctor, midwife or maternity service provider to get a full STI test, including a syphilis test.



Treatment is easy

Treatment for syphilis is easy. Medication (usually through injections) gets rid of the infection and is safe for you and your baby.

You will need to do blood tests after your treatment to check that it has worked.

Your doctor or sexual health specialist can treat and monitor you.



How to prevent syphilis

The best way to prevent syphilis is to practice safe sex:

- Always use condoms with new sexual partners with condom-safe lubricants (e.g. water or silicon based).
- Avoid sexual activity with someone who has a sore or an ulcer on their genitals, anus or mouth.
- Get regular STI tests that include syphilis.
- Sexual partners should also be tested (and treated) regularly to stop syphilis passing back to you or to others.
- If you do not feel comfortable contacting sexual partners yourself, you can visit www.letthemknow.org.au for advice or talk to your GP or health care provider.



Scan the QR code to find out more about syphilis and women's health.