

## Syphilis – Frequently Asked Questions

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) contracted through unprotected anal, vaginal or oral sex. Infection is also possible through sharing of equipment for injection or snorting drugs. A pregnant woman can transmit syphilis infection to her unborn child.

### What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Many people with syphilis have no symptoms but can still transmit syphilis and are at risk for complications. Syphilis can cause serious and permanent damage to the body if untreated. During pregnancy, a mother infected with syphilis can spread the infection to the developing fetus. Syphilis can produce different symptoms at each stage of infection, including:

- an open sore at the point of infection (genital area, anus, mouth or lips),
- flu-like illness,
- muscle aches and pains,
- fatigue, and/or
- a rash on the chest, back, palms of hands and bottoms of feet.

### What is the status of syphilis cases within Eastern Health's region?

Rates of syphilis infection remained high in 2018 with a total of 33 infectious syphilis cases. These cases are being seen in both men and women, aged 15 to 68 years. In 2018, Eastern Health also saw the first cases of confirmed and suspect congenital syphilis. The risk of transmission to a fetus in untreated women is 70 to 100 per cent in early infection and up to 40 per cent in later stages of infection, i.e. infected more than 6 months ago. Of all cases identified, 20 per cent of cases were co-infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and 13 cases were diagnosed with neurosyphilis, experiencing complications such as vision and hearing loss.

### What is congenital syphilis?

Congenital syphilis occurs when a pregnant woman, who has syphilis, spreads the disease to her unborn infant. When passed to a baby, syphilis can result in miscarriage, newborn death, and severe lifelong physical and developmental concerns. Without early and regular prenatal care, a pregnant woman may not know that she has syphilis and that her baby is at risk. Syphilis during pregnancy is easily cured with the right antibiotics.

### Who should be screened for syphilis?

Cases of syphilis are being seen in both men and women, aged 15 to 68 years. Anyone who has unprotected sex with a casual contact should be screened for syphilis, particularly:

- Those with signs and symptoms of syphilis
- Those with multiple sexual partners
- Those who have had sexual contact with known syphilis cases
- Men who have sex with men (MSM)
- Persons who trade sex for money, drugs or shelter/persons involved in sex work

- Injection drug users
- Those with history of sexually transmitted infections
- Sexual partners of any of the above
- All pregnant women ideally in their first trimester and those at high-risk should have screening repeated in the third trimester.

## What can someone do to limit their risk of getting syphilis?

To reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection, including syphilis and HIV, follow these practices:

- Practise safer sex, by properly and consistently using a condom or oral dam for each sexual encounter (oral, anal and vaginal).
- Limit your number of sexual partners.
- You and your partner should get tested for sexually transmitted infections before becoming sexually active.
- Get tested if you have several sexual partners or when you change sexual partners.
- If you use drugs, DO NOT share equipment.

## How does someone get tested for syphilis?

If an individual has had unprotected sex or suspects that they may have contracted syphilis, it is important to see a health care professional and to be tested as soon as possible. Health-care providers can test for the infection through a simple blood test.

To get tested:

- Talk to your health-care provider.
- Contact Planned Parenthood Newfoundland and Labrador at 1-877-666-9847.
- Call Eastern Health's sexual health clinic at (709) 752-4882 or email [sexualhealthclinic@easternhealth.ca](mailto:sexualhealthclinic@easternhealth.ca).
- Visit Eastern Health's website:
  - [Syphilis](#)
  - [Take Care Down There](#)