

# Syphilis in pregnancy

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about syphilis in pregnancy.

**IMPORTANT:** This is general information only. Ask your doctor or midwife about what care is right for you.

## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is an infection you can catch by having sex (either vaginal, anal or oral) with someone who has syphilis. If you are pregnant, syphilis can also pass to your unborn baby. If not treated, syphilis can cause serious health problems for you and your baby.

## Can syphilis harm your baby?

Yes, if not treated, syphilis can cause your baby to be born early (premature), be born with syphilis (congenital syphilis), die before birth (be stillborn) or die after birth. Some babies born with congenital syphilis look completely normal while others have damaged bones and teeth or problems with their sight or hearing as they grow up. Some babies may also have problems with their brain development later in life.

Treating syphilis as early as possible in pregnancy gives the best chance of preventing harm to your baby.

## How do you know if you have syphilis?

Syphilis can be detected with a blood test. All pregnant women are advised to have at least one blood test for syphilis early in their pregnancy. Sometimes extra tests are recommended later in pregnancy. The symptoms of syphilis can be different depending on how long you have had the infection. Sometimes there aren't any symptoms or they are hard to recognise.

Syphilis can cause:

- Sores on or around the vagina, anus, rectum, lips and in the mouth
- A red rash on the back, chest, hands and feet
- A fever (high body temperature) and fatigue (feeling tired)

Swelling of the glands in the groin and armpits  
Contact your health care provider straight away if you think you might have syphilis or if you have had sex with someone who might be infected.

## Why do you need extra tests during pregnancy?

Syphilis is more common in some groups of people than others. Extra tests can help detect syphilis that is caught later in pregnancy. People who are recommended to have extra tests include:

- Young women (15 to 29 years old)
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who live in areas where syphilis is common
- People who have sex with more than one person (or their partner(s) have sex with other people)
- People whose sexual partners are from countries where syphilis is common (e.g. Papua New Guinea, African countries)
- People who use drugs, especially 'ice'

Your health care provider will talk with you about whether extra tests are recommended for you.

## How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is treated with antibiotics (usually penicillin). The antibiotics are normally given by injection into the cheek of your bottom. You can get syphilis again after being treated. If you get syphilis again, you will need more antibiotics.

After treatment, it is important to have regular blood tests to check that the treatment has worked. Come to all your appointments and have all your tests. This includes tests after treatment, to tell if the antibiotics have worked.

## Does your partner need to know?

It is very important that all of your recent sexual partners (regular and casual) get treatment. This is so you don't get re-infected and they don't give syphilis to someone else. Your health care provider can inform your sexual partners for you. Talk to your health care provider about what is the best way to tell them.

## When can you have sex again?

You need to wait **at least 7 days** after you and your partner have been treated, and any symptoms either of you have are gone, before having any type of sex again. It is important that both **you** and **all your partners** are treated for syphilis. Partners must also wait at least 7 days until after you have both been treated before having sex again.

## What can you do to help your baby?

If you have been diagnosed with syphilis in pregnancy there are a few simple things you can do to help keep you both as well as possible:

- Always use a condom during any type of sex to help prevent you getting syphilis again
- Come to all your appointments and have all your tests. This is very important as your test results will help the doctor work out what tests and treatment your baby may need after birth
- Talk to your health care provider if you are worried about anything or do not understand the treatment and testing you are getting

## Will your baby have syphilis?

If you have syphilis in your pregnancy, it is not easy to tell if your baby will be born with syphilis (congenital syphilis). Your baby is more likely to have syphilis if:

- You have had no antibiotic treatment for syphilis
- You have had treatment less than 30 days before your baby is born
- You were treated with an antibiotic that is not penicillin
- You become infected with syphilis again after you have been treated

Your baby will have a blood test after birth to see if they are infected with syphilis. Sometimes other tests are also needed to find out if your baby has syphilis or not.

## Will your baby need treatment?

Only some babies need treatment with antibiotics. Your health care provider will talk with you about what treatment is best for your baby. Sometimes your baby will need to stay in hospital to have antibiotic treatment.

After you and your baby go home, it is very important you bring your baby to all follow-up appointments. This is to:

- Make sure your baby doesn't have syphilis
- See if more tests or treatment are needed
- Make sure any treatment your baby had has worked
- Make sure your baby is healthy and well

## What about your older children?

If you already have children, your health care provider may suggest he/she have a blood test to check for syphilis. Your health care provider will talk to you about this.

## Support & Information

**Better to Know** is a website designed to offer confidential and anonymous contact tracing for all sexual partners. It also provides information on multiple STIs as well as reminders for follow-up tests.

[www.bettertoknow.org.au/index.html](http://www.bettertoknow.org.au/index.html)

**Let them Know** is a website designed to offer confidential and anonymous contact tracing for all sexual partners.

[www.letthemknow.org.au](http://www.letthemknow.org.au)

**13HEALTH** (13 432584) is a phone line that provides health information, referral and services to the public.

**Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline** 1800 882 436 (free call) offers free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families relating to issues of conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care. [www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline](http://www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline)

**Lifeline 13 11 14** Lifeline offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone. [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Queensland Government** provides accurate locations for sexual health services near you [www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/hiv-clinic-search](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/hiv-clinic-search)

**Queensland Clinical Guidelines:** Parent information *Syphilis in pregnancy and Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction (JHR)*. [www.health.qld.gov.au/qcg](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/qcg)