

Syphilis is on the rise! Learn more to protect yourself and your partners.

Over the past decade, syphilis rates have risen dramatically¹ in Canada, disproportionately impacting gay, bisexual, and queer men, as well as trans and gender-diverse people (GBT2Q). This guide was made to help our communities navigate syphilis as a part of our sexual health.

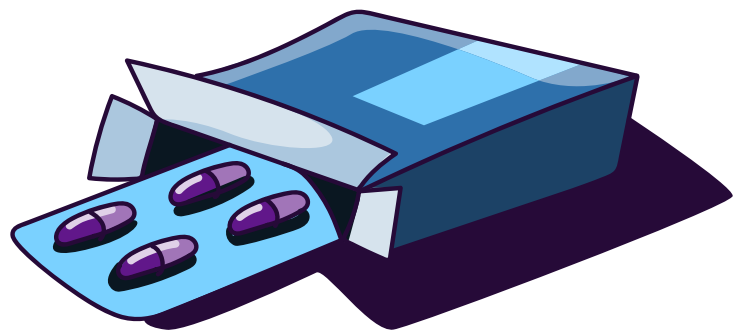


Syphilis: the basics

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can be transmitted through anal, oral, and vaginal (frontal) sex. Though less common, it can also be transmitted by deep kissing, sharing sex toys, and sharing needles.

Symptoms appear and progress differently from case to case. Sometimes, syphilis causes sores on the genitals, rectum, or mouth, which are often painless. Other symptoms can include swollen lymph nodes, rashes, hair loss and occasionally more serious problems like changes in vision, hearing or balance. But, many people with syphilis don't notice any symptoms and there is no strict timeframe in which symptoms develop.

Whether or not you have symptoms, it is important to get tested regularly if you are having sex. If left untreated, syphilis can end up spreading through the body and causing serious damage to the brain, nervous system, and other organs. Fortunately, syphilis can often be treated with a single dose of antibiotics.



Are you pregnant, or planning to be?

Syphilis poses serious health risks to the fetus when left untreated. If you are pregnant or planning to be, ask your healthcare provider about syphilis testing. Getting tested multiple times throughout pregnancy is also recommended if you have a continued risk of syphilis infection, or are in an area with a known syphilis outbreak.

¹ Public Health Agency of Canada. Report on Sexually Transmitted Infections in Canada, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/report-sexually-transmitted-infection-surveillance-canada-2019.html> (Accessed 1 June 2023).

Getting tested

Most places that test for HIV and other STIs will be able to test for syphilis. For example, you can get tested at a sexual health clinic, family doctor's office, or walk-in clinic. You can also ask your usual healthcare provider for support. Like HIV testing, getting tested for syphilis usually means getting blood drawn and waiting to find out your

lab results. Testing regularly if you're sexually active will ensure you can get treatment early and avoid passing syphilis on to your partners.

Have you tested positive for syphilis before?

When getting tested, let your healthcare provider know if you've had a previous syphilis infection. During a syphilis infection, the body produces antibodies that can be detected by a blood test. These antibodies can remain in the blood for years after treatment, which can impact the results of the test.

Dealing with a positive test result

Once diagnosed, syphilis is usually straightforward to treat. If caught early, treatment will often involve a single dose of antibiotics, with an injection into each butt cheek. After treatment, you will usually be asked to get tested again to confirm that the treatment was successful.

Your healthcare provider may also ask for your help with contact tracing. In particular, they may ask for the name and contact information of any recent sexual partners. This process is meant to be anonymous where possible, and your name won't be mentioned when these partners are contacted. Contact tracing helps connect people to testing and treatment and reduces the likelihood of syphilis being passed on to others. Keeping in touch with your sexual partners, where possible, allows for a more effective public health response.

In addition to navigating symptoms and treatment, receiving a positive STI result can also present an emotional challenge, particularly because of stigma. For many, stigma related to sex and STIs can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and unease. If you feel distressed after an STI diagnosis, consider

accessing mental health support alongside sexual health services, or talking to a friend that you trust.

Preventing syphilis in the future

When it comes to preventing syphilis in the future, options include:

- Using condoms
- Not sharing needles or drug use equipment
- Not sharing sex toys or washing them before use on different partners
- Taking doxy-PEP

Doxy-PEP involves taking a drug called doxycycline after sex to prevent bacterial STIs, particularly syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea. Research shows doxy-PEP to be effective, but so far this evidence is only available for those identified male at birth. Since doxy-PEP is a new sexual health strategy, it may also be more difficult to access in your area. Learn more about doxy-PEP and how to access it here:

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