

## **SYPHILIS**

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection caused by *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis is easily treated, but can have serious complications if not treated soon after infection. Syphilis can infect both men and women, and it can be passed from an infected pregnant woman to her unborn infant.

### **Primary Syphilis**

The first stage of syphilis presents as a hard, usually painless sore on the genitals, mouth or other point of sexual contact. This sore usually appears three to four weeks after infection, but it can appear any time between ten and ninety days after infection. It normally heals completely within four weeks. Even though the symptoms disappear without treatment, the person will usually still be infectious.

### **Secondary Syphilis**

During the second stage there may be a flat, red skin rash, hair loss, fever, lumps on the genitals or general tiredness. These symptoms may appear two to four months after infection and last for several weeks. If not treated, they often come back. The rash can be over the whole body, and is very contagious. Someone with syphilis may remain infectious, through sexual contact, for up to two years.

### **Late Syphilis**

The third stage occurs in about one third of untreated individuals. There may be severe

complications for the brain or heart. This stage is not infectious.

### **Transmission**

During infectious stages, syphilis can be highly contagious. The condition is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact with an affected area. Depending on the type of sexual contact, sores may appear on or near the genitals, lips, fingers or anus.

### **Diagnosis and Treatment**

Blood tests are used to detect syphilis infection. People who test for syphilis will have a positive result even if syphilis is no longer active. There are two types of tests available to help find out if the syphilis infection is current or past.

#### *Testing for current infection*

RPR test can detect current infection, showing the activity of syphilis in the body. This test can be used to diagnose active syphilis infection, and to monitor the effect of treatment. It can be difficult to interpret the results of syphilis blood tests. Sometimes the tests need to be repeated. If there is any uncertainty about the result, you should discuss it with an experienced doctor.

#### *Testing for past infection and previous treatment*

Several different tests can be performed to check for past infection. The results of these tests are positive in people who have been

exposed to syphilis previously. These tests remain reactive for life, so a positive result does not necessarily mean you currently have syphilis. Some people with a positive result are not aware they have had syphilis before.

### **Treatment**

A penicillin injection is very effective treatment for syphilis. Sometimes you need more than one dose, even though the symptoms improve after the first dose. It is important to follow your doctor's instructions regarding follow-up. Other treatments are available if a person is allergic to penicillin.

### **Follow-up**

After treatment, regular blood tests are done to check that the infection has been cured. Recent sexual partners need to be tested and treated.

### **Prevention**

To avoid syphilis, use condoms and dams with water based lubricant during sex. Used properly, barriers will reduce the risk of infection. If you have syphilis, do not have sex until treatment is finished and a blood test confirms that the condition has been treated successfully.

*Sexual Health Service Tasmania is staffed Monday to Friday from 8.30 am until 5.00 pm. Clinic times vary from site to site so please contact your local office for details (see contact details on the back of this pamphlet).*

**Sexual Health Service  
Clinical Services**

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**SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICE  
A joint Australian and State  
Government Program**

*The Royal Hobart Hospital is Tasmania's largest hospital and provides a number of state-wide services including cardiothoracic surgery, neurosurgery, burns management, hyperbaric and diving medicine, neonatal intensive care and high-risk obstetrics. It is the major teaching and research hospital for the State and works closely with the University of Tasmania.*

*Many students in the health care professions are taught within the Hospital, and gaining skills in examining and interviewing patients is an important part of their education and training. We ask for your co-operation and encourage you to participate in our teaching and research activities. Your permission is required for participation.*

The Royal Hobart Hospital encourages feedback from patients, relatives and visitors. This feedback helps staff to better understand the needs of patients and provide the best possible patient care.



**The Royal Hobart Hospital  
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**Information  
Pamphlet**

Sexual  
Health  
SERVICE

**Syphilis**