

Frequently Asked Questions

Infectious syphilis outbreak

An outbreak of infectious syphilis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was declared in South Australia in May 2017.

This outbreak has been linked to an outbreak in Northern and Central Australia which began in 2011 and to the middle of 2019 has affected more than 2,600 people in Queensland, Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia.

Why do I need to know about the outbreak?

Syphilis is a serious infection which can spread easily.

If passed during pregnancy to a baby, syphilis can cause stillbirth or severe abnormalities in newborns. Contracting syphilis can also increase the risk of acquiring other sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

What is syphilis and how do people get it?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection which in most cases occurs via sexual contact. It can also be passed on during pregnancy to a baby.

Syphilis is most infectious within the first two years of infection during the primary and secondary stages (early infection).

In the primary stage, symptoms of syphilis can include a hard, usually painless, ulcer (called a chancre) developing at the site of infection (usually on the genitals) and painless swelling of lymph glands. A person with syphilis may not know they have the infection.

The secondary stage occurs two to four months after infection, lasts several weeks and often reoccurs in the following two years. The most common feature is a flat, red rash which can appear on one or more areas of your body, including your palms and feet.

If left untreated, syphilis may enter a third (tertiary) stage which can affect the brain, spinal cord, heart or blood vessels and can cause severe complications, disability and even death.

If I am pregnant and catch syphilis, can it harm my baby?

Yes. There is a very high risk of transmitting syphilis to a baby during pregnancy. Infection of the baby with syphilis can occur in the uterus or during vaginal delivery. This infection is referred to as 'congenital syphilis'.

Congenital syphilis is very serious and can cause babies to be stillborn or have severe abnormalities affecting eyes, ears and bones.

How and where can I get tested for syphilis?

Contact your local health service, GP or Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service to get tested for syphilis. You can find local health services using the National Health Service Directory: www.nhsd.com.au.

Testing for syphilis is done with a blood test.

During a syphilis outbreak, screening for syphilis during pregnancy should be increased to identify possible cases of congenital syphilis. In addition to testing at the first visit (10-12 weeks), testing should be repeated at 28 weeks, 36 weeks, at delivery, and at the six week post-natal check.



How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is treated with penicillin injections. The length of treatment depends on the stage of infection.

Sexual partners of people diagnosed with syphilis should also be tested and, if found to also have the infection, be treated.

How can I reduce my risk of getting syphilis?

Practicing safer sex will reduce your risk of syphilis infection along with other sexually transmissible infections (STI). Practicing safer sex means using condoms with water based lubricant, avoiding sex when visible sores/symptoms are present and having regular sexual health check-ups with your GP or sexual health service.

If you are diagnosed with syphilis (or other STI) it can be treated, but it is also important to let your sexual partner/s know they should be tested as well for the benefit of their sexual health and to reduce your risk of being reinfected.

Your local health service or the doctor where you had your tests done might ask you questions about sexual partners for this reason. The health department also has an Aboriginal staff person helping with contacting partners so you might hear from them. If you want to let partners know yourself, see the following websites for tips on how to talk to them, examples of what you can say/write and even ways you can send an SMS or email anonymously:

- > [Let Them Know](#)
- > [The Drama Down Under](#)
- > [Better to know](#)

Where can I find more information?

For more information about syphilis symptoms, testing and treatment, visit the SA Health website: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au.

For more information

**Communicable Disease Control Branch
Health Regulation and Protection
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www.sahealth.sa.gov.au**

Public-I1-A1

