

## Syphilis Fact Sheet

### What is Syphilis?

- Syphilis is the oldest known sexually transmitted disease. It is caused by an organism (bacteria) which enters the blood stream through the mucous membranes or broken skin. It is then carried to all body organs and tissues.
- It usually takes 10 days to 3 months for the symptoms to show up. Some people may not have any noticeable symptoms. People infected with syphilis can spread it to others during sexual intercourse, even if they have no signs or symptoms of the infection.

### What are the symptoms?

- The disease evolves in 3 stages:
  - **Primary:** The first sign is a painless sore (chancre) on the penis, anus, labia, vagina, cervix, throat or lips. It is easy to miss this sign as it heals and goes away in 1-5 weeks. Swollen lymph nodes can also be palpable.
  - **Secondary:** About 6 weeks after the first signs, skin lesions or a rash can appear all over the body, including the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Sores may be found in the mouth and the genital area. There can also be fever, swollen glands, sore throat, fatigue, headaches and patchy hair loss. This rash is easy to confuse with other skin conditions. These symptoms also go away, even without treatment, but the infection is still present in the blood, organs, and other tissue. With no treatment, the rash may recur over the next 1-2 years. This is a very contagious time.
  - **Latent:** In untreated syphilis, the germs continue to spread to all parts of the body but there are no outward signs of the disease. A blood test will show it is still there. From 3-30 years after the primary infection, serious damage can show up in various body organs such as the heart, large blood vessels, bones, joints, or central nervous system.

### How is syphilis diagnosed?

In early syphilis, if a sore is present, a swab can be done. A blood test will show the disease about 1 month after the chancre appears. Once you have had syphilis, some blood tests may remain positive for the rest of your life

### **How is syphilis treated?**

Syphilis is best treated in its early stages to prevent serious complications and the spread of the disease to others. Penicillin injections are the first treatment choice. For those allergic to penicillin, certain other antibiotics can be given. Treatment will cure syphilis but cannot reverse many damages already done to internal organs. After treatment, blood tests will show that the disease has been cured and that there are no flare-ups or re-infection. Without treatment, about 33% of those infected develop serious complications later in life

### **Are there complications?**

If syphilis is treated early there should be no complications. Without treatment or with late treatment, serious damage can occur to the heart, large blood vessels, liver and brain. If not treated, a pregnant woman can pass syphilis to her unborn child. This can cause stillbirth or severe damage to the baby. During pregnancy, all women are tested for syphilis.

### **How is syphilis prevented?**

- Never have sexual contact with anyone who has a sore(s) in the genital area.
- Use condoms/latex barriers every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

### **If you are diagnosed with syphilis:**

1. Avoid sexual contact, even with a condom/latex barrier until your doctor says all blood tests are satisfactory.
2. Provide the names of all your sexual contacts, so that they can be offered testing and treatment as soon as possible

### *For More Information:*

- **For more information contact your local health care provider. Or Tele-care health line 1-888-255-1010**