

# Syphilis and pregnancy

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about syphilis and pregnancy. Informed consent and woman centred care are integral to health care in Queensland. Decisions about your care are always up to you. We recognise that people have diverse gender identities. See our statement on [gender associated language](#).

**IMPORTANT:** This is general information only. Ask your doctor, midwife or nurse what care is right for you and your baby.

## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). You can get syphilis by having sex (vaginal, oral or anal) with someone who has syphilis. It can also be spread by contact with an active syphilis sore (e.g. touching or kissing). If you are pregnant, syphilis can also pass on to your unborn baby.

## How do you know you have syphilis?

Syphilis can be found with a blood test or a swab of a syphilis sore. Sometimes there are no symptoms – this is why it is important to be tested. Syphilis can cause:

- sores in or around the vagina, anus, lips, or 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

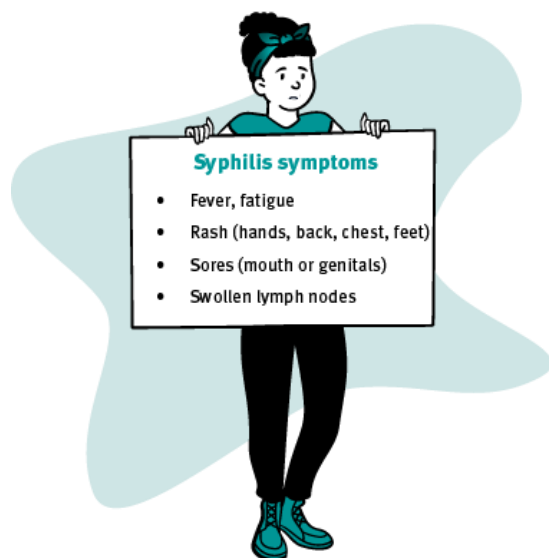


Image: girl with list of symptoms of syphilis



## Can syphilis harm your baby?

Syphilis during pregnancy can cause your baby to be born early (premature), be born with syphilis infection (congenital syphilis), die before birth (be stillborn) or die after birth.

Some babies are born with damaged bones and teeth or have problems with their sight or hearing as they grow up. Some babies also have problems with their brain development later in life.

Early treatment can stop syphilis harming your baby. It is best for baby if:

- you get tested and find out if you have syphilis or not
- have treatment with antibiotics as soon as possible, if you do have syphilis

## Can you avoid syphilis?

Your chance of getting syphilis is less if you and your sexual partner:

- only have sex with each other (and no-one else)
- use a condom or dental dam every time you have vaginal, oral or anal sex
- don't have sex if there is a sore or lump around the mouth, genitals or anal area
- have regular sexual health checks

## Will you be tested in pregnancy?

In Queensland, three syphilis tests are recommended for all pregnant women.

- early in pregnancy (best before 10 weeks)
- at 26–28 weeks
- at 36 weeks

Your healthcare provider will also talk with you about extra tests. Extra tests are needed if:

- you miss any of your recommended tests
- you or your partner have sex with someone else
- you have symptoms that could be from syphilis
- a test result shows you have syphilis
- there are other circumstances putting you at risk

## **If you get syphilis during pregnancy**

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

The treatment for syphilis is a penicillin antibiotic. It is given as an injection into the cheek of your bottom (buttocks). Penicillin is safe in pregnancy. If you have an allergy to penicillin, tell your healthcare provider before you have treatment.

You need to have a blood test on the same day as you have the antibiotic treatment. You also need regular blood tests after that. This is to check the antibiotics have worked.

Some people can have a reaction after treatment. The reaction is usually mild and is not a reason to avoid having antibiotic treatment. If you feel unwell after treatment tell your healthcare provider.

You can read more about this reaction in the information sheet called *Syphilis in pregnancy and Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction (JHR)*.

### **Does your partner need to know?**

Yes, if you get syphilis all your sexual contacts also need to get treated. This is so they don't get sick from syphilis, and so they don't give syphilis to someone else.

You can get syphilis more than once. You need antibiotics each time.

Your healthcare provider can tell your sexual partner (or partners) for you if you want. Talk to your healthcare provider about the best way to tell your partner.

### **When can you have sex again?**

You and your partner need to wait **at least** 7 days after you have both finished treatment before having sex again. You also need to be free of all symptoms. Talk with your healthcare provider if you are not sure.

## **What can you do to help your baby?**

If you have syphilis during pregnancy, come to all your appointments and have all your follow-up tests. Your test results help your healthcare provider work out what tests and treatment your baby needs after birth.

Having all your treatment and tests in pregnancy can mean your baby needs less tests. They may not need to stay in hospital for as long.

### **Will your baby have syphilis?**

It is not easy to tell if your baby will be born with syphilis (congenital syphilis). It can't always be picked up on ultrasound scan. Your baby is more likely to have syphilis if:

- you don't get treated
- your baby is born less than a month after your treatment
- you get infected with syphilis again after treatment

Having antibiotic treatment as early as possible can stop syphilis passing to your baby (congenital syphilis).

### **Will your baby need treatment?**

You and your baby will both need a blood test. This helps work out if your baby needs treatment. Only some babies need treatment with antibiotics. 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:

- check your baby doesn't have syphilis
- see if your baby needs more tests or treatment
- check any treatment has worked
- check your baby is healthy and well

### **Support & information**

**Queensland Clinical Guidelines:** Parent information <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/qcg>

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

**Better to Know:** free sexual health resource for First Nation peoples offering confidential and anonymous contact tracing for all sexual partners. Provides information on multiple STIs and reminders for follow-up tests. <https://www.bettertoknow.org.au>

**Let them Know:** website offering confidential and anonymous contact tracing for all sexual partners. <https://www.letthemknow.org.au>

**13HEALTH:** 13 432584 provides free health information, referral and services to the public

**Mob Link:** 1800 254 354 connects First Nation peoples living in South East Queensland to health and social services. <https://www.iuih.org.au>

**Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline:** 1800 882 436 (free call) free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families about conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care. <https://www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline>

**Queensland Government:** lists locations for sexual health services <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/hiv-clinic-search>

**True Relationships and Reproductive Health:** reproductive and sexual health care. <https://www.true.org.au>

**DVConnect Womensline:** 1800 811 811 (24 hrs a day 7 days a week) support for domestic and family violence <https://www.dvconnect.org>

**Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC):** lists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health (ACCHO) primary health care services in Queensland <https://www.qaihc.com.au>