

Syphilis in pregnancy and Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction (JHR)

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 a Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction?

Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction (JHR) is a reaction that can happen after antibiotics are given to treat certain types of infections.

It is not an allergic reaction. It is caused by the antibiotics killing off the bacteria (germs).

Syphilis is one of the infections where this type of reaction can happen. It only happens after the first dose of treatment.

What happens if you have JHR

Symptoms usually appear 2–12 hours after treatment. They are usually mild and disappear on their own within 24 hours.

If you get JHR you might:

- feel hot (fever)
- feel unwell and extra tired
- sweat a lot
- have a headache
- have pain in your joints
- have a fast heartbeat
- get a rash

JHR can also cause your:

- baby's heartbeat or movements to change
- contractions to start

Should you wait until after birth to treat syphilis?

No, don't delay having treatment for syphilis.

It is very important that syphilis is treated as soon as possible during your pregnancy.

Syphilis can cause very serious problems for your baby. It can sometimes cause your baby to die if not treated in time.

The risk to your baby from JHR is much lower than the risk of syphilis.

To learn more about syphilis in pregnancy, you may like to read the parent information called [Syphilis and pregnancy](#).

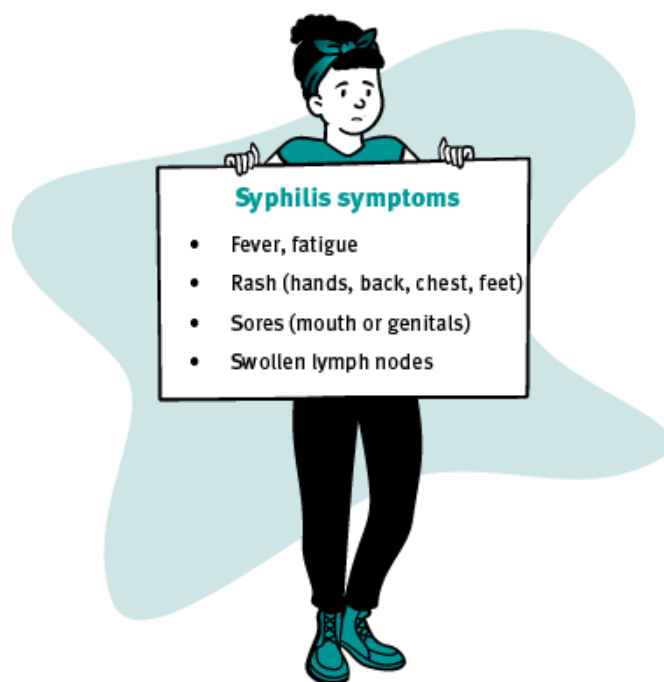


Image: girl with list of symptoms of syphilis



Is there treatment for JHR?

There is no special treatment for JHR. Most women only need to rest, eat well and drink plenty of water until the symptoms pass.

Simple pain medications (e.g. paracetamol) can help with symptoms.

Always talk with your healthcare provider before taking any medications.

Does everyone get JHR?

No not everyone who is treated for syphilis will have a reaction.

You are more likely to need extra care if there are concerns about your baby or if you:

- are more than 24 weeks pregnant
- have high levels of the syphilis bacteria in your blood
- are also living with HIV

Your healthcare provider may suggest that you stay in hospital so you and your baby can be observed closely if these circumstances apply to you.

What should you do if you get JHR?

If you don't feel well or have any symptoms of JHR after syphilis treatment, ask your healthcare provider for advice on what to do.

If you are not sure what to do, go to your local hospital or health centre. It is important to tell them that you have been treated for syphilis and when the treatment started. They will advise you on what to do.

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>