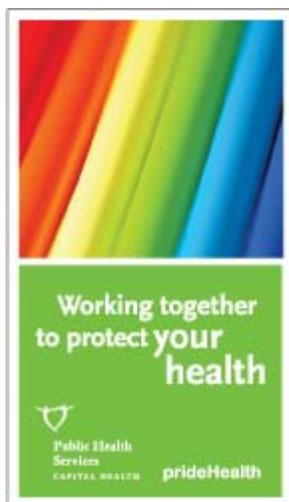


Syphilis is Back - FAQ



Anyone can get syphilis. Currently there is an outbreak of syphilis in our Gay, Male Bisexual and Male Queer communities in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Public Health wants to work quickly with the community to stop this outbreak. If you have questions or concerns, please contact us at 902-481-5824.

This FAQ has been written specifically for Gay, Bisexual and Queer men. For more general information about syphilis, visit [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Warning – Links to '[Graphic Clinical Images](#)' are contained in this site.

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What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a bacterium. *Anyone* can get syphilis from any type of sexual contact, but the most common ways to get it are giving or getting anal sex, oral sex or vaginal sex. A pregnant woman can pass it to her unborn baby, which can cause birth defects and stillbirth.

- Syphilis stays with you until you are treated. An infected person can spread the disease for quite some time without knowing it - up to two years.
- Knowing the symptoms of syphilis is an important way you can protect your health. If syphilis is not treated, the bacterium can go on to damage vital organs, including the heart, eyes, joints and brain-causing permanent damage. Fortunately we have a test for syphilis and antibiotics that can cure syphilis.

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Syphilis is dangerous.

- If not treated, syphilis can damage your heart, brain and eyes. The chancre (ulcer) of syphilis makes it much easier for HIV to pass from person to person as well. Remember that this ulcer may be hidden in the rectum or mouth, but is still infectious. Syphilis is dangerous for people with HIV because it often progresses quickly to the form that causes brain damage if it is not treated.

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What are the symptoms of syphilis?

- The symptoms of syphilis are not always obvious. You may not realize you have them.
- The symptoms of syphilis show up anywhere from 10-90 days after a person is infected. The average time is about three weeks.
- The [first symptom is an ulcer or 'chancre'](#) (usually painless) at the site of infection - that could be on the penis, scrotum, anus, or inside the mouth or rectum. This is called primary syphilis. Many people do not notice that they have primary syphilis. People with primary syphilis are infectious and can spread the illness.
- If syphilis isn't treated right away, [secondary syphilis occurs](#). The chancre (ulcer) heals and 2-12 weeks later, flu-like symptoms (fever, body ache) occur and a rash appears on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet or the entire body. Wart-like bumps may also appear in the mouth or around the genitals or anus. This rash is not itchy, but it is highly infectious. **These symptoms will go away without treatment, but the syphilis bacteria will stay in the infected person's body.**
- After a period of time (often years) tertiary syphilis develops. This is when the syphilis bacterium causes permanent damage to nerves, bones, joints, eyes, heart and brain of the infected person. This damage cannot be repaired. People with HIV are especially at risk for syphilis to progress quickly to this dangerous state.

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How do I know if I have syphilis?

- If you have had sexual contact (giving or getting anal or oral sex) with someone who has syphilis, you are at risk. Unprotected sex, anonymous sex, multiple sexual contacts and using street drugs all increase your risk of catching syphilis. **Using a condom correctly and consistently can reduce the risk of syphilis.** Condoms reduce the risk, but if the ulcer or rash is on a part not covered by the condom, you could still get or give syphilis.
- You may not have any of the symptoms listed above. Or you may have a painless sore in your mouth, on your penis, scrotum or anus. **If you are not tested regularly, your first symptom may be the rash of secondary syphilis.**
- The best way to know if you have syphilis is to get tested regularly (at least yearly and before a new sexual partner). If you have any type of unusual growth, bump, wart or ulcer on your penis, scrotum and anus or in your mouth, head to your doctor or the STD clinic to get it checked out. **Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side?** [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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You may not know you have syphilis.

- Syphilis often goes undetected. The symptoms of syphilis are not always obvious. You may not realize you have them. Getting tested regularly is the best way to make sure that you are in charge of your sexual health. An annual test for syphilis should be part of your yearly health check-up. We also recommend a test before any new sexual partner, or every 3-6 months if you have multiple sexual contacts. ***Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side?*** [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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Antibiotics cure syphilis

- Syphilis was a dreaded disease in the past because there was no cure. We now have antibiotics that can cure syphilis. The usual cure is a shot of penicillin, but your health care provider or the STD clinic will be able to advise you on the best treatment for you. [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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If I got treated for syphilis and was cured, can I get it again?

- YES! Just like you can get strep throat or tonsillitis again and again, you can get syphilis again if you have sex with an infected person. Having syphilis once does not give any immunity. [Safer sex](#) and regular testing (at least yearly and before a new partner) are the best ways to stop the spread of syphilis. ***Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side?*** [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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How do I avoid getting syphilis?

- Be aware of high-risk behaviours (including unprotected anal or oral sex, unprotected rimming, anonymous sex, sex with someone who has a syphilis chancre (ulcer), multiple sexual contacts and/or using street drugs.)
- Protect yourself. **Using a condom correctly and consistently can reduce the risk of syphilis.** Condoms reduce the risk, but if the ulcer or rash is on a part not covered by the condom, you could still get or give syphilis.
- If you're thinking of having sex with a new partner, discuss sexually transmitted infections. Tell your partner that you want to have protected safer sex and discuss getting tested before you have sex. ***Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side?*** [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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What can I do if I think I have syphilis?

- You should be examined and treated if the results are positive. [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)
- Your health care provider may do a blood test or an examination to diagnose syphilis. Sometimes treatment is given immediately, and other times treatment follows the results of the blood test. Your health care provider will let you know the best option for you.
- Your sexual contacts also need to be examined and treated. If your sexual contacts are not treated, they can give the infection back to you or infect others. Public Health realizes that telling your sexual contacts that you have syphilis is not easy. **We are able to inform your**

sexual contacts that they have been exposed to syphilis without giving out any information about you. For more information, contact [Public Health](#) at (902) 481-5824.

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What can I do if someone I had sex with tells me that they have syphilis?

- Being told that you may have been exposed to syphilis can be shocking, fortunately there are health care professionals in our community who will help you to get examined for syphilis and treated if needed. You can make an appointment with your family doctor, the prideHealth outreach nurse, [Anita Keeping \(anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca\)](mailto:anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca), the [STD Clinic](#) ((902-473-2272), [Halifax Sexual Health Clinic](#) (902-454-9659) or call [Public Health](#) at 902-481-5824.
- Until you are able to see a health care provider, keep yourself and your partner safer and use a condom. Using a condom correctly and consistently can reduce the risk of Syphilis. Condoms reduce the risk, but if the ulcer or rash is on a part not covered by the condom, you could still get or give syphilis. Avoid sexual practices that will increase your risk of getting or passing on syphilis such as anonymous sex, multiple sexual contacts, using street drugs, and having unprotected sex (anal or oral, giving or getting).
- If you have a female sexual contact, remember that syphilis can be really dangerous to an unborn baby.

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What do I need to know if I am bisexual?

- All the answers in the other sections apply to bisexual guys as well.
- There is more information that is really important for you to know if you are bisexual. Women can get the syphilis ulcer on their vulva or anus or it could be hidden within the mouth or vagina. Your female sexual contacts could have syphilis and not realise it – and could get it or give it to you through vaginal sex. Condoms reduce the risk, but if the ulcer or rash is on a part not covered by the condom, you could still get or give syphilis.
- A pregnant woman can pass syphilis on to her baby. This can cause permanent damage and even stillbirth. If you have a female sexual contact, remember that syphilis can be really dangerous to an unborn baby. If you test positive for syphilis, we will work with you to inform any sexual contacts so that they can get treated quickly. Remember, **Public Health is able to inform your sexual contacts that they have been exposed to Syphilis without giving out any information about you.** For more information, contact Public Health at 481-5824. ***Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side? [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)***

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Is syphilis a problem for people with HIV?

- People with HIV have increased risk of syphilis complications involving the brain and nervous system.
- People with HIV are more likely to need higher doses of antibiotics to treat syphilis, and may have to take them for longer periods of time and be followed closely by their doctor.
- If you have HIV and are treated for syphilis, it's important to follow-up with a doctor to make sure your syphilis infection is completely cured.
- Since we know we are in an outbreak right now, why not get tested just to be on the safe side? [Click here to find out how to get tested . . .](#)

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How do I get tested?

You can make an appointment with:

- Your family doctor
- prideHealth outreach nurse [Anita Keeping](mailto:anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca) (anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca)
- [STD clinic](tel:902-473-2272) (902-473-2272)
- [Halifax Sexual Health Clinic](tel:902-454-9659) (902-454-9659)
- [Public Health](tel:902-481-5824) at 902-481-5824.
- If you test positive for syphilis, treatment will be arranged for you.

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Is there anything else I should know?

Yes! You are eligible for free immunization against Hepatitis A and B. Ask about it when you get tested or contact:

- prideHealth outreach nurse [Anita Keeping](mailto:anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca) (anita.keeping@cdha.nshealth.ca)
- [STD clinic](tel:902-473-2272) (902-473-2272)
- [Halifax Sexual Health Clinic](tel:902-454-9656) (902-454-9656)
- [Public Health](tel:902-481-5824) at 902-481-5824

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