

Once someone has had all the injections, he or she is no longer infectious for others. It is best not to have sex during the course of treatment. If that isn't possible, then a condom should be used.

Warning partners

In the first stage of syphilis, all partners from the past three months should be warned, whether a condom was used or not. In the second stage of syphilis, all partners from the past six months should be warned. In a later stage, partners from the past year (or possibly two years) should be warned.

Further information

Further information about STIs is available on the Soa Aids Nederland (STI AIDS Netherlands) website. Soa Aids Nederland is a centre of expertise for HIV infection and other STIs. The www.soa aids.nl website gives detailed information on HIV and other STIs. Young people can visit the Dutch information site www.sense.info.

Schorer Gay & Lesbian Switchboard

Schorer gives information and advice about anything relating to homosexuality.

Tel: 020-623-6565 or e-mail: helpdesk@switchboard.nl

The switchboard is open Monday to Friday 12 to 6 pm;

Saturday, Sunday and public holidays 4 to 6 pm;

www.schorer.nl; www.mantotman.nl (in Dutch).

For answers to your questions on STIs, call the AIDS STI Infoline

0900-204 204 0 (10 cents per minute)

Mon - Fri 10 a.m. - 8 p.m. - Thurs and Fri 2 - 8 p.m.

or send an e-mail to: infolijn@soa aids.nl

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Syphilis



Syphilis (also known as “the pox”) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). If syphilis is left untreated, it can cause serious health problems. The infection is caused by bacteria that get through the mucous membrane (skin) of the vagina, penis, anus or mouth, depending on the way someone has had sex. These bacteria then spread through the whole body via the bloodstream and lymph glands. Syphilis is diagnosed by blood tests or by taking a sample from a spot where the infection is noticeable. In the early stages of the illness, syphilis is fairly easy to treat with antibiotics.

Symptoms

Syphilis develops in the same way in men and women. Two to twelve weeks after infection, one or more sores that are no bigger than a centimetre will appear in the infected area. This could be on the penis or in the vagina, anus or mouth. The sore will feel quite hard but is usually painless. Sometimes it might be difficult to see, especially if it is in the vagina or anus. Lymph glands near the sore may be swollen, but not usually painful. Without any treatment, the sore will go away by itself within three to six weeks. But the infection hasn't gone: in most cases, the second stage of the infection will start several weeks or months later. The bacteria have then spread through the body via the bloodstream.

In the second stage, there could be notice the following symptoms:

- A skin rash over the whole body, including the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. The marks are not always very clear and will disappear again. The infection won't go away by itself.
- Flu-like symptoms, pains in muscles and joints, swollen glands and a high temperature.
- Hair loss, leading to several bald patches on the head.
- Flat, grey, moist warts in skin folds (particularly in the genital area and around the anus).

Possible complications of syphilis

If syphilis remains untreated in the first two stages, the infection enters the so-called latent stage. The bacteria are still in your body without you noticing it. During the first year, and possibly the second, the infection can be passed on to others. Later, often after many years, new symptoms may appear. Various internal organs may become seriously damaged, including the brain, heart, aorta (the body's main artery), spinal cord and bones. This can cause all kinds of health problems, including paralysis, deafness, tinnitus (noises in the ears), strokes, psychiatric disorders, pain, cardiac arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat), cardiovascular disorders and bone abnormalities. The type of symptoms and problems that develop depends on which organs have been damaged, but the brain is most commonly affected. People with HIV may develop brain disorders at an earlier stage after infection.

During pregnancy, a woman can pass on a syphilis infection via the placenta to her unborn child. This is prevented if the infection is treated in time. That's why antenatal check-ups in the Netherlands always include a blood test to check for syphilis.

Treatment

Treatment for syphilis consists of penicillin injections. If it was a recent infection, a single injection is enough, but a course of injections are necessary to treat an infection in later stages of the disease. After the first injection, there may be flu-like symptoms. This is the body's reaction to the syphilis bacteria being destroyed. After the final injection, the patient has to go back for check-ups during a period of one to two years. These check-ups are very important, particularly for people with HIV. It is also important for sexual partners to be tested and, if necessary, treated.