

PROMOTING SYPHILIS AWARENESS



A **factsheet** for Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, Transgender, and Gender-Diverse (WG2STGD) People



Overview of Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection typically transmitted through sexual intercourse. It is a sexually transmitted blood borne infection (STBBI) which can cause sores on or in the genitals, anus, rectum, and/or lips and mouth. The complications of untreated syphilis can be severe, affecting not only the physical body but also the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of an individual.

Hence, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach to promoting health and preventing disease.

Fortunately, syphilis can be effectively managed with antibiotics, and the contraction and transmission of syphilis can be prevented by practicing safe sexual behaviours and avoiding contact with sores caused by a syphilis infection¹. Additionally, incorporating traditional healing approaches, and seeking guidance from community Elders can contribute to a more holistic and comprehensive management of syphilis².





Syphilis in Canada

Cases of syphilis in Canada are on the rise, notably impacting Indigenous communities, constituting what is often termed a “silent epidemic” due to its **asymptomatic** nature.



In 2021, Canada reported **11,268 cases** of syphilis infection marking a **729 per cent** increase in the infectious syphilis rate for females from 2017³.

This surge is particularly pronounced among First Nations, with a rate of **308.8 per 100,000 people** – 13 times higher than the national average.



Additionally, cases of congenital syphilis are at their highest in many decades⁴. This significant increase highlights the crucial importance of awareness regarding preventive measures, regular testing, and timely medical care³.

Asymptomatic refers to a condition where a person is infected with a disease but does not display noticeable symptoms or signs of the illness.

Risk Factors

Behaviours such as unprotected sex, multiple partners, and contact with individuals who have syphilis increase the risk of contracting it⁵. Moreover, Indigenous communities experience a higher level of impact as many Indigenous individuals, especially

women, face significant disadvantages and encounter barriers in accessing healthcare and the healthcare system⁶.

Social determinants of health play a crucial role in shaping individual behaviours and vulnerabilities⁴. For instance, individuals facing housing instability may encounter challenges in maintaining consistent access to healthcare and adopting safe sexual practices, thereby increasing their risk of contracting syphilis. Similarly, substance use, and mental health issues can contribute to a higher likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours, further elevating the risk of syphilis transmission⁵.

Syphilis and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

Syphilis and HIV can intensify each other's harmful effects. The risk of contracting and transmitting HIV is heightened when exposed to syphilis sores. It's important to note that HIV weakens the immune system, which can make you more susceptible to other infections. This connection between syphilis and HIV makes managing these infections more challenging and can complicate treatment for both conditions⁷.

How can you get it?

Syphilis and HIV can intensify each other's. You can get syphilis through oral, vaginal, or anal sex with a partner who has syphilis. The infection is transmitted when your mouth, vagina, or anus comes into contact with the syphilis sore on your partner's mouth, vagina, or anus. Transmitting syphilis from mouth-to-mouth contact, like kissing, is very rare. Pregnant individuals with syphilis can also pass the infection on to their unborn child⁵.





How do you know if you have it?

Many people with syphilis have no signs or in other words syphilis is often asymptomatic. When signs of infection do happen, they usually take two to three weeks to appear. If left untreated, syphilis will go through different stages⁵.

The Stages of Syphilis:

Primary Stage

A round, firm, painless, and sometimes wet sore will appear where the infection entered your body. This is called a chancre, the chancre will disappear on its own, usually three to six weeks after it appears. Sometimes, these sores go unnoticed, meaning you might not realize you have the infection⁵.

Late Stage

If untreated, secondary syphilis turns into late syphilis (also called latent or tertiary syphilis), emerging two to 30 years after primary syphilis occurs. This stage may not exhibit symptoms, yet the bacteria can harm vital organs such as the eyes, skin, bones, liver, kidneys, and heart⁵.



Secondary Stage

Between two weeks to three months after infection, a rash may appear on the chest, stomach, genitals, palms of your hands or soles of your feet, lasting two to six weeks. The rash usually does not itch and can sometimes be hard to see. You may also feel sick like you have the flu⁵.

Neurosyphilis

Syphilis can impact the brain and nervous system during its later stages, resulting in neurosyphilis. This condition can cause severe complications, including personality changes, confusion, memory, and visual problems, and in severe cases, the potential for stroke or seizures⁵.

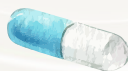


Prevention:

Culturally informed prevention strategies play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of Indigenous communities. In addition to Western preventive measures consider the following prevention practices²⁸:

- **Community Dialogue:** Have open and respectful conversations within the community about sexual health, emphasizing the importance of communication and destigmatization.
- **Guidance from Elders:** Seek guidance from community Elders, who can provide cultural insights on relationships, sexual health, and holistic well-being.
- **Cultural Values:** Embrace traditional values that promote healthy relationships, mutual respect, and understanding.
- **Supportive Education Programs:** Implement educational initiatives within the community to provide comprehensive information about sexual health, safe practices, and preventive measures, fostering a better-informed population.
- **Accessible Healthcare Resources:** Advocate for improved access to culturally sensitive and community-centered healthcare services, ensuring that individuals have the resources they need to address their sexual health needs in a respectful and inclusive environment.

Practicing safe sex with latex condoms and oral dams, as well as having open conversations with sexual partners about their history of sexually transmitted infections



(STIs) are vital prevention methods. While practicing safe sex remains crucial, integrating these culturally grounded prevention strategies ensures a comprehensive approach to safeguarding community health. However, if there are any signs of discharge, sores, or if rashes appear then prompt consultation with health care providers is advised.

Syphilis, Pregnancy and Breastfeeding



If you are pregnant and have syphilis, there is a risk of passing the infection on to your baby during pregnancy or delivery, potentially leading to birth defects or stillbirth. If you suspect syphilis, timely testing and treatment are crucial to prevent transmission to your child^{8,9}.

For those wishing to breastfeed, it's possible with a syphilis infection if there are no sores on the breast^{8,9}. However, consulting a healthcare professional is recommended to address specific circumstances. Presence of syphilis sores on the breast could pose a risk of transmission to the infant during breastfeeding, so prompt medical advice is crucial if any symptoms or concerns arise.

Additionally, individuals who are pregnant or planning to conceive should consider routine screening for sexually transmitted infections, including syphilis¹⁰. Early detection and treatment during pregnancy significantly reduces the risk of transmission to the baby, helping prevent birth defects or stillbirth. Maintaining open communication with healthcare providers, undergoing regular screenings, and following medical advice are essential steps to ensure the well-being of both you and your child in cases of syphilis during pregnancy⁹.



Testing:

Usually, testing for syphilis is done by taking a blood sample, but if you have a sore, the medical practitioner might take a swab of the sore. A test for syphilis will not show up positive until three to four weeks after the bacteria has been transmitted⁸.

Treatment and Care:

Syphilis is very easy to treat using antibiotics during the early stages. Syphilis can be treated during the later stages as well by using a different length and dosage of antibiotics. However, once syphilis starts causing problems with your organs, the damage that is done cannot be undone, so it is important to get tested regularly⁷.

Combatting Stigma:

The stigma of sexually transmitted blood borne infections (STBBI) like syphilis can be challenging. Here are some strategies to help manage its impact:

- **Education:** Learning about syphilis empowers you to challenge misconceptions.

- **Community Support:** Seek guidance and wisdom from community Elders and leaders, acknowledging their role in providing support and understanding, fostering a sense of belonging.
- **Open Communication:** Have open communication with loved ones and community to dispel myths and reduce stigma.
- **Guidance and Support:** Seek guidance from knowledgeable health care professionals, counselors, or community Elders or Healers.
- **Holistic Self-Care:** Embrace self-care activities that promote holistic well-being, incorporating practices that resonate with your cultural values and practices.
- **Advocacy:** Support Indigenous-led campaigns promoting accurate syphilis information, cultural sensitivity in health care, and collaboration with community leaders.





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