

It's time to talk about the elephant in the room

Syphilis

You are receiving this as your organisation may be well-placed to help identify people who are at risk of syphilis, or displaying signs and symptoms of the disease, and sign-post them for testing and treatment.



Syphilis is increasing nationally, and public health teams in the North East are seeing a rise in cases. If syphilis is left untreated, it can lead to more serious health complications including potentially irreversible and life-threatening problems with the brain, heart, bones, eyes or nerves.

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that can be caught by having vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone who is infected. It is also possible for syphilis to be passed on from mother to child during pregnancy (known as congenital syphilis). It is one of the most easily caught sexually transmitted infections (STIs).



Who is at risk?

Anyone of any age can get syphilis if they have unprotected sex with someone who is carrying the infection. However, some people can be disproportionately affected, such as:

- People who have sex with commercial sex workers
- Intravenous drug users (IVDUs)
- Crack cocaine users
- Men who have sex with men

Testing is quick, free, and easy.

SYPHILIS IS CURABLE

Antibiotics are effective at curing syphilis. County Durham Sexual Health Service or a GP will be able to discuss treatment options with anyone who is diagnosed with syphilis.

Syphilis can be tested with a simple blood test, or sometimes a swab from an ulcer or rash. Anyone can get tested quickly, easily, and without judgement at:

- County Durham Sexual Health Services
- GP Practices across the North East
- Online

Common Symptoms

Most people with syphilis don't notice any symptoms and don't know they have it.

Symptoms change over time and may come and go.

Syphilis usually has 3 stages and treatment can be started at any stage but the sooner the better.

Primary Syphilis

The first syphilis symptoms appear between 10 days and 3 months after contact with the infection. Small, painful or painless sore(s) (ulcers) on the penis, vagina, anus, rectum, tongue, lips. Swelling in the lymph glands (such as in the neck, groin or armpit) often happens with the ulcers. The sore will then disappear within 2 to 6 weeks. Untreated primary syphilis may progress to secondary syphilis.



Secondary Syphilis

Secondary symptoms will appear a few weeks after the symptoms of primary syphilis disappear. A rash appearing on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet that can sometimes spread all over the body – this is usually non-itchy white or grey warty growths most commonly on the penis, vagina or anus white patches in the mouth flu-like symptoms such as tiredness, headaches, and high temperature patchy hair loss (including the head, beard and eyebrows). These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks, or come and go for a few months. Syphilis will then move into a latent stage where no symptoms are experienced. During the first year of this stage syphilis can still be passed on. Throughout this stage syphilis can still be passed on from mother to baby.



Tertiary syphilis

The symptoms of tertiary syphilis can begin years or even decades after the initial infection. 1 in 3 people who are not treated for syphilis develop serious symptoms eventually. Such as damage to the heart, nervous system, brain and bones. People who develop late syphilis may go on to have strokes, meningitis, dementia, loss of coordination, numbness, blindness, heart attacks or heart failure.

County Durham Sexual Health Services

Central Booking Line (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm): 0191 372 8700

<https://www.cddft.nhs.uk/services/sexual-health>

