

# Let's be clear, syphilis is here!

Learn more to protect  
yourself and your  
partners.



Over the past decade, syphilis rates have risen greatly<sup>1</sup> in Alberta with outbreaks in rural and urban areas alike, significantly impacting queer and trans communities, especially Two-Spirit, gay, bisexual, and queer men and trans women (2S/GBTQ+).

This guide was informed by and is for queer and trans Albertans to help our communities navigate syphilis as a part of our sexual health.

## Syphilis: the basics

**Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can be transmitted through anal, oral, and vaginal (frontal) sex.** It can also be transmitted by deep kissing, sharing sex toys, and sharing needles, though this is less common. Syphilis is mainly detected through bloodwork but symptoms can vary greatly and many people with syphilis don't notice any symptoms at all.

**If left untreated, new and potentially serious symptoms can develop.**

Often, a few weeks after acquiring syphilis a person might develop sore(s) on the genitals, rectum, or mouth, which are usually painless. Other symptoms which develop later can include swollen lymph nodes, a rash (particularly on the hands, feet and chest), hair loss and occasionally more serious problems like changes in vision, hearing, balance, or damage to organs like the heart or brain.



Scan to view [examples of physical symptoms of syphilis](#).

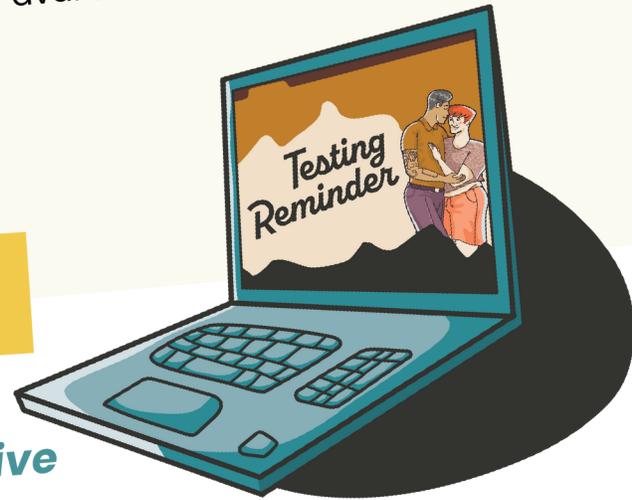
<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. Report on Sexually Transmitted Infections in Canada, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/report-sexually-transmitted-infection-surveillance-canada-2019.html> (Accessed 1 June 2023).

# Getting Tested

If you're sexually active, it is recommended that you get tested for syphilis at least once per year, ideally every 3-6 months regardless of whether or not you have symptoms. If you have symptoms or a partner tells you they've tested positive for syphilis, contact your local clinic as soon as possible – you may be eligible for testing and early treatment, even before results are confirmed. **Early detection allows faster access to treatment, helping you avoid passing it on to your partners.**

Visit [Alberta Health Services](#) to find a nearby testing site. You can also contact Alberta Health Link by calling 811.

Most places that test for HIV and other STIs will also test for syphilis at the same time. For example, **you can usually get tested at a sexual health clinic, family doctor's office, or walk-in clinic.** Like HIV testing, getting tested for syphilis typically involves getting blood drawn and waiting to find out your lab results. Turnaround time for results can vary but they are usually available within a week.



## Have you tested positive for syphilis before?

In response to a syphilis infection, the body produces antibodies that are detected by a blood test. These antibodies remain in the blood for decades after treatment. When getting tested, let your healthcare provider know if you've had a previous syphilis infection and if you received treatment. This will impact how your healthcare provider interprets your test results.

## Are you or a partner pregnant, or planning to be?

Syphilis poses serious health risks to a fetus when left untreated. If you or your partner are pregnant or planning to be, ask your healthcare provider about syphilis testing. If you or your partner have multiple sex partners during pregnancy, getting tested multiple times is recommended.





## Dealing with a positive test result

**Treatment usually involves two injections of antibiotics, one into each buttock during the same visit.** In other cases (i.e. the infection is caught at a later stage, if it is unclear for how long you had the syphilis infection, or if you have neurological symptoms) you will need a longer course of antibiotic treatment. You will be asked to return for follow-up blood testing over 1-2 years for monitoring to confirm that the treatment was successful.

Syphilis is a provincially reportable infection, which means **healthcare providers are required to notify public health to help prevent further spread.** If you've been diagnosed with syphilis, your healthcare provider or a public health nurse will ask you for the names and contact information of any sexual partners in the last 3 months to 1 year.

**You can choose to notify your partners yourself or ask the clinic or public health team to do it for you** – they will do this without ever using your name. This process, called contact tracing, can help stop syphilis from being passed on to others, showing care for your partners and your community. Many people appreciate being told so they can get tested and treated early.

## After-care tips

**You may experience side effects after treatment, moderate pain or soreness at the injection site, or flu-like symptoms. The symptoms will self-resolve, usually within 24 hours, but to alleviate discomfort you can:**

- Ask the provider to place a cold pack on the sites of injection for a few minutes, and/or press against the site of injection for 10 seconds prior to injecting the medication.
- Ask the provider if lidocaine can be used to reduce discomfort. Providers can now order lidocaine with benzathine penicillin G-LA (Bicillin®-LA) in Connect Care.
- Rest, stay hydrated, and avoid strenuous activity for a few days.
- Apply a cold or hot compress to the injection site and gently stretch the area to ease soreness several times throughout the day.
- Monitor how you feel and jot down any changes or symptoms.
- Contact your healthcare provider if symptoms persist, worsen, or new ones appear. Receiving a positive STI result can also present an emotional challenge.
- If you feel distressed after an STI diagnosis, consider accessing mental health support or talking to a friend that you trust.



# Strategies to prevent syphilis and other STIs



- Using condoms/dental dams.
- Taking **doxy-PEP** (doxycycline post-exposure prophylaxis) after sex to prevent syphilis, chlamydia, and to a lesser extent gonorrhoea.

Learn more about doxy-PEP and how to access it here:  
Contact Alberta Health Services (811) or the [Alberta 211](#) helpline for resources.



- Regularly testing for STIs, every 3–6 months or sooner if any symptoms develop.
- Having open communication with sexual partners about STI status and sexual activity with others.



- Incorporating HIV prevention tools such as **HIV PrEP** (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) or **PEP** (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis).
- **Not sharing needles** or drug use equipment (e.g. filters, keys to snort).
- **Not sharing and/or thoroughly washing sex toys** if engaging with multiple sexual partners.

Get tested, talk about it, and help stop the spread. By taking action, you're not just protecting yourself – you're supporting your whole community.

