



CONGENITAL SYPHILIS

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WHAT IS CONGENITAL SYPHILIS?

- Congenital syphilis is caused by a bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*.
- It occurs when a mother with syphilis passes the infection to her baby during pregnancy or birth.

CONGENITAL SYPHILIS CAN HAVE SERIOUS HEALTH IMPACTS ON UNBORN BABIES. HOW WILL CONGENITAL SYPHILIS AFFECT MY BABY?

Without treatment, syphilis during pregnancy can cause:

- Miscarriage (when a baby dies in the womb before 20 weeks of pregnancy)
- Stillbirth (when a baby dies in the womb after 20 weeks of pregnancy)
- Premature labour (when a baby is born early)
- Low birth weight baby
- Death shortly after birth

DO ALL BABIES BORN WITH CONGENITAL SYPHILIS HAVE SIGNS OR SYMPTOMS?

- It is possible that a baby born with congenital syphilis won't have any symptoms at birth.
- Without treatment, the baby may develop serious health problems.
- These problems may develop within the first few weeks after birth, but they can also develop years later.
- Babies who do not get treatment can die from the infection.

Symptoms can include:

At birth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bone deformities • Severe anaemia (low red blood cell count) • Issues with their vital organs (liver and kidneys) • Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes) • Swollen liver or spleen • Brain and nerve problems (like vision or hearing loss) • Skin rashes
Early congenital syphilis (up to 2 years of age)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A runny nose • Skin rashes • Bone abnormalities • Eye, liver or kidney problems
Late congenital syphilis (which presents after 2 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of bone problems • Teeth problems • Eye problems (cataracts, blindness) • Hearing loss (deafness)

WHO IS AT RISK?



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The babies who are most at risk are:

Any baby whose mother has syphilis during pregnancy is at risk of congenital syphilis. Syphilis is more common in:

- People with more than one sexual partner
- People whose male partners have sex with men
- Sex workers who do not regularly get tested for sexually transmitted infections
- People of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin
- People who inject drugs
- People with overseas sexual contacts particularly from countries where STIs are common

I'M PREGNANT. DO I HAVE TO GET TESTED FOR SYPHILIS?

- **Yes.** All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis at their first antenatal visit (the first time you see your doctor for health care during pregnancy).
- If you don't get tested at your first visit, make sure to ask your doctor about getting tested during a future check-up.
- Getting tested is important because you may not know you have syphilis. Many people with syphilis may not have symptoms or the symptoms may be similar to other health problems.
- Some women may need to be tested more than once during pregnancy.
- Talk with your doctor about your risk for syphilis to determine if you need more testing.

IF I HAVE SYPHILIS IN PREGNANCY, HOW WILL MY DOCTOR KNOW IF MY BABY HAS CONGENITAL SYPHILIS?

- Your doctor must consider several factors to determine if your baby has congenital syphilis:
 - The results of your syphilis blood test; and/or
 - If you were diagnosed with syphilis, whether you received treatment during your pregnancy.
- If you have had syphilis during pregnancy, once your baby is born, your doctor may want to test your baby's blood, perform a physical exam of your baby, or do other tests to determine if your baby has congenital syphilis.

MY BABY WAS BORN WITH CONGENITAL SYPHILIS. IS THERE A WAY TO TREAT THE INFECTION?

- **Yes.** There is treatment for congenital syphilis with antibiotics.
- Babies who are born with congenital syphilis need to be treated **right away** because they can develop serious health problems.
- Depending on your baby's results, they may need to stay in hospital and receive treatment. It is important that babies treated for congenital syphilis get follow-up care to make sure that the treatment worked.

SHOULD MY SEXUAL PARTNERS ALSO BE TREATED?



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- **Yes.** If you have been diagnosed with syphilis, all your sexual partners (both regular and casual) from the last few months should be tested.
- If you have difficulty telling your partners to get tested, the website [Let Them Know](#) can help. It has general and sample emails, text messages and letters you can send to your partners either personally or anonymously.

HOW CAN I REDUCE THE RISK OF MY BABY GETTING CONGENITAL SYPHILIS?

- Your baby will not get congenital syphilis if you do not have syphilis.
- The most important way to protect against syphilis and congenital syphilis is having protected sex using a condom.
- Although condoms can prevent transmission of syphilis, there may be contact with syphilis sores in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.
- If you are pregnant or planning a family, you and your partner should be tested for STIs to prevent any infections being passed onto your baby.
- Getting tested for syphilis at your first prenatal visit with your doctor is essential. Being tested and treated for syphilis in pregnancy can prevent congenital syphilis.
 - If you test positive for syphilis, you need to be treated right away.
 - Do not wait for your next prenatal visit.
- Even if you have been tested for syphilis in the past, you should get tested again when you become pregnant.
- Having an open and honest conversation with your doctor about any current sexual health concerns or history of STIs is important.
 - Discuss any new or unusual physical symptoms you may be experiencing, and whether you have new or multiple sexual partners.
 - This will help your doctor make the best testing recommendations for you and your partner(s).

WHERE CAN I GO TO GET HELP?

[1800 My Options](#) for local GP clinics who offer health services along with options outside Gippsland
[Clinic 281, Sexual Health and Wellbeing at Gippsland Lakes Complete Health in Bairnsdale](#)

Ph: (03) 5168 9639

[Sexual Health in Practice Service at Grandview Family Clinic in Cowes](#)

Ph: (03) 5951 1860

[Sexual Health in Practice Service at Yarram and District Health Service in Yarram](#)

Ph: (03) 5182 0222

[Sexual and Reproductive Health Service at Latrobe Community Health Service in Morwell](#)

Ph: (03) 1800 242 696

MORE INFORMATION:

[Syphilis – Better Health Channel](#)

