

Syphilis

Syphilis is an infection caused by the bacteria *treponema pallidum*. The bacteria is found in sores and rashes that can occur anywhere on the skin or inside the mouth or on the genitals. Syphilis is known as the 'great mimic' because its symptoms resemble those of many other diseases. The genitals, skin and central nervous system are affected and, if left untreated, it can ultimately lead to the degeneration of bone, heart and nerve tissue.

The first stage of syphilis is characterised by a lesion (or chancre). It is painless, and is found exactly where you had contact with the syphilis bacteria. In about half of the cases reported, the lesion is generally a dark pink colour, has a raised firm red border and does not bleed easily. If the lesion is left untreated it may heal on its own, but if medical attention is not sought, the disease will progress.

Once the primary lesion has healed, new symptoms will affect the patient. A rash can form, normally on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, it can be flat, scaly, bumpy, or crater like. The rash does not itch and is not uncomfortable. It is also possible for this rash to appear on the penis, vagina or mouth. Although the rash may disappear, the person is still infected with syphilis and must be treated.

Treatment

Treatment is very straightforward and not as drastic as it used to be. A course of antibiotics is prescribed, which is generally effective within three months. There is a one in ten chance that it may reappear up to a year after treatment, so a return visit to the clinic may be in order.

Syphilis and HIV

Having an open sore such as chancre makes it easier for secondary opportunistic infections to happen. This is especially true for HIV, which can easily get into your body if the skin is broken. Also if you have HIV and an open syphilis sore, then you are more likely to transmit HIV to another sexual partner. It is always wise to check yourself and your partner for symptoms.