

Syphilis Alert

December 22, 2006

An increased number of people with syphilis have been recently diagnosed in Saskatchewan. Most of these cases have been reported in men who have sex with men. Localized outbreaks of syphilis have also been reported in several large Canadian urban centers.

Syphilis is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years; yet remain at risk for serious complications (heart problems, blindness, paralysis, insanity, and even death) if they are not treated.

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore, chancre (shank-er). These sores, which are painless and often go unnoticed, occur mainly on the genitals, vagina, anus or in the rectum. Sores can also occur on the lips or in the mouth. Transmission of the bacteria occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

People with genital sores from syphilis are at increased risk to become infected with HIV during sex. People with HIV and genital sores caused by syphilis are more likely to spread HIV to others during sexual encounters. It is estimated that this risk is 2 to 5 times higher.

Some of behaviors (risk factors) that increase your chances of becoming infected with syphilis include:

- Unprotected sexual contact with a person infected with syphilis
- Multiple sex partners
- Sex with anonymous partners, which can include hooking up with sexual partners through the Internet
- Injection drug use
- Exchange of sex for money

If you think you are at risk, talk to your doctor or health professional. Any unusual discharge, genital sore or rash -- particularly in the groin area -- could be a sign of a STI and should be a signal to refrain from having sex and to see a doctor as soon as possible.

You can reduce your risk of syphilis and HIV by consistently using condoms for all sexual encounters. You can also reduce your risk by avoiding alcohol and drug use because these activities may lead to risky sexual behavior. The surest way to prevent all STIs is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and known to be

uninfected. Washing the genitals or urinating after sex does not prevent the transmission of an STI, including syphilis.

Syphilis is diagnosed through a simple blood test. Individuals who participate in sexual behaviors with increased risk should be tested for syphilis, HIV and other STIs every three to six months.

Syphilis can be cured with special antibiotics. After being treated, it is possible to become infected with syphilis again. Caution should be taken to reduce risks and to prevent re-infection.

FREE TESTING AND TREATMENT:

http://www.rqhealth.ca/programs/comm_hlth_services/pubhealth/pubhealth_dis.shtml

http://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/your_health/ps_public_health_sexual_health.htm

PROTECT YOURSELF. RESPECT YOURSELF. GET TESTED.