



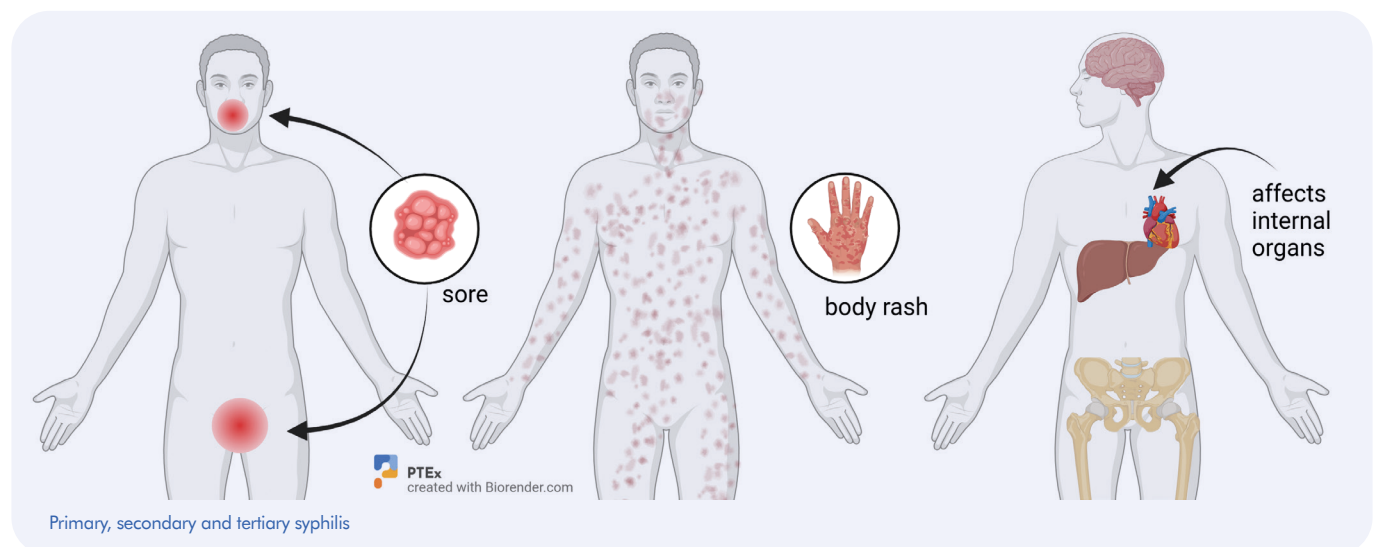
PATHOLOGY TESTS EXPLAINED

Information about pathology tests to help everyone take control of their health and make the right decisions about their care.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TESTING FOR SYPHILIS

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that if left untreated can lead to serious health problems. Because it is caused by bacteria it can fortunately be cured with antibiotics.

There has been a big rise in infections in Australia in recent years. About half of people infected with syphilis have no symptoms or their symptoms are very mild or are similar to those of other health problems. The only way to know for sure whether or not you have syphilis is through testing.



Syphilis is classified in stages

- Primary syphilis – when you are first infected you may have sores around your genital area or mouth that clear up within a few weeks. These are often painless and can go unnoticed.
- Secondary syphilis – your symptoms may include rashes, swollen lymph glands, fever, headaches or tiredness. These usually resolve by themselves, but if you aren't diagnosed and don't have any treatment you can be infectious for up to two or more years.
- Latent syphilis – this may develop if you go untreated. You have no symptoms, and you are not infectious, but the bacteria stay in your body for life, and you are at risk of having tertiary syphilis.
- Tertiary syphilis – this develops in about one-third of people who have not been treated. In these cases, the syphilis bacteria damages brain, heart, blood vessels, liver, nerves, spinal cord, eyes bones or joints. Symptoms can arise many years after your original infection and can lead to mental illness, blindness, other neurological problems, heart disease, or death.



Syphilis and pregnancy

Syphilis can cause severe complications in pregnancy and result in miscarriage or stillbirth. It can also be passed on to the baby as congenital syphilis. In some cases, the baby is born without symptoms but without treatment, they may go on to develop a range of serious health problems and can die. Usually, these develop in the first few weeks, but sometimes they do not show up until months or years later.

If you are pregnant, it is important that you are tested for syphilis at your first prenatal visit and in the final trimester. You may also be tested at the time and soon after the birth of your baby.



Testing for syphilis

Syphilis is caused by *Treponema pallidum* bacteria. To find out if you have syphilis you will need to have blood tests that look for the antibodies your body makes to fight the bacteria. These are called serology tests. No single test is able to diagnose active syphilis, which means different types of tests are needed. Most laboratories report results as reactive or non-reactive.

Treponemal tests

These detect the antibodies you make specifically to the *Treponema pallidum* bacteria and are used to identify whether you have been exposed to syphilis or not.

However, there are limitations. It can take time to develop antibodies, so test results may be negative early on. Also, these tests can report a false-positive test – the test says you are positive(reactive) when you are not.

A test result that is positive (reactive) shows that you have been infected with syphilis, but it cannot tell when that was, if it was at some point in the past, whether you had treatment at the time, or if you need treatment now.

Non-treponemal tests

These detect non-specific antibodies and are done by the laboratory if the treponemal screening test is positive (reactive). This type of test can help show how infectious you are and how recent the infection is likely to be.

Rapid Antigen Reagin (RPR) testing

This is the most common test used to confirm the results of treponemal tests. It is also used in monitoring treatment.

Molecular testing with PCR

If you have sores, your health team can swab these to collect a sample for genetic testing. This test, which detects the DNA of the bacteria, is very accurate. It is especially useful in the early stage when antibodies may not have developed.



Treatment

Syphilis is treated with the antibiotic, penicillin. Newly acquired infections can be cured easily. A longer treatment is needed if you have been infected for more than two years or if the timing of infection is unknown. Follow up blood testing is usually undertaken after treatment to ensure the infection has resolved. Someone who has been previously treated can become infected with syphilis a second time if exposed again.



Questions to ask your doctor

- Why does this test need to be done?
- Do I need to prepare (such as fast or avoid medications) for the sample collection?
- Will an abnormal result mean I need further tests?
- How could it change the course of my care?
- What will happen next, after the test?

For more detailed information on these and many other tests go to pathologytestsexplained.org.au



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www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au

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Pathology Tests Explained is managed by a consortium of medical and scientific organisations representing pathology practice in Australia. More details at:

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