

# Infectious Syphilis ALERT

Information for Aboriginal medical services, sexual health clinicians, general practitioners and antenatal services



Health

## Key points:

1. A syphilis outbreak in Aboriginal people has potential to spread to NSW
2. Screen Aboriginal people under 35 years of age
3. Screen pregnant Aboriginal women early in gestation and at 24-28 weeks
4. Seek help with syphilis testing, treatment and contact tracing from your local sexual health clinic or Sexual Health InfoLink on 1800 451 624

## Syphilis

- Caused by the spirochete *Treponema pallidum*
- Symptoms typically begin within three weeks but possibly up to three months after exposure
- Highly infectious in the first two years after infection, increases risk of HIV transmission
- Transmitted via vaginal, anal and oral sex; condoms are partially protective
- Transmitted to fetus in utero causing perinatal death, premature delivery and congenital abnormalities

## Epidemiology of the outbreak among Aboriginal people to 31 July 2017

- Syphilis has spread amongst Aboriginal people across northern and central Australia, and was most recently detected in South Australia (Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Ceduna and the APY lands) in November 2016
- 1628 outbreak cases since 2011, including 11 congenital cases with 5 deaths
- See <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-infectious-syphilis-outbreak.htm>

## When to request syphilis serology?

- Screen all Aboriginal people under 35 years of age as part of a sexually transmissible infection (STI) screen
- When there is clinical suspicion of syphilis - also collect a swab for syphilis PCR if a chancre (painless ulcer) is present
- During antenatal testing at the first visit (10-12 weeks) and 24-28 weeks for all pregnant Aboriginal women and other pregnant women whose baby will be identified as Aboriginal
- When any person is diagnosed with another STI (also test for HIV at this time)

## Think syphilis when

- There is a painless ulcer (chancre) in the genital, anal or oral region or anywhere else on the body
- There is a rash anywhere on the body, that may include the hands and soles of the feet

## Treatment

- Benzathine penicillin, 1.8 g IMI stat, refer to the [Australian STI management guidelines](#)
- Pregnant women diagnosed in the third trimester need a second dose one week later
- For penicillin allergy, contact your local sexual health clinic
- Advise no sexual contact for seven days after treatment
- Reinforce safe sex messages, including using condoms and lubricant

## Notification and treatment of partners

- Contact tracing is critical to prevent further transmission; treat and test all sexual partners in the previous 3 months for primary syphilis, and previous 6 months plus duration of symptoms for secondary syphilis
- Seek help with partner notification from your local sexual health clinic or NSW Sexual Health Info Link on 1800 451 624 or [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au) as required

## More information and help

- NSW Sexual Health Info Link: 1800 451 624 or [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)
- Australian STI management guidelines [www.sti.guidelines.org.au](http://www.sti.guidelines.org.au)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'V. Sheppeard'.

**Dr Vicky Sheppeard**  
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