


Supplementary material 4 : Syphilis self-testing infographic distributed as part of the syphilis self-testing kit

SYPHILIS

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacteria. It is important to test yourself for syphilis if you think you may have been at risk of getting infected. If it is left untreated, it can lead to serious consequences for your health.


What are the signs and symptoms?



The symptoms are often unnoticeable and you could be infected without knowing it. Symptoms include:

- sores/ulcers on the penis, anus and around the mouth
- blotchy red rashes on the hands or feet
- skin growths around the anus (similar to genital warts)
- white patches in the mouth
- tiredness, headaches, joint pain, high temperature
- swollen glands in the neck, groin or armpits.

Why test myself?



It is difficult to diagnose syphilis from only symptoms because these are usually not specific. In fact, a lot of cases don't show any symptoms at all. Testing for the disease is important because it means you can get treated quickly, to avoid developing complications and transmitting syphilis to your partner.

Being infected with syphilis can also make it easier for HIV to be transmitted through sex. Testing and treating syphilis can therefore help to reduce your risk of getting HIV as well.

Why men who have sex with men (MSM)?


Syphilis is a global public health problem, particularly among MSM in urban settings, where more and more infections are. It has been found that MSM are at higher risk of getting syphilis. This could be because less men are ensuring safe sex practices and using condoms.

In MSM that are HIV+, syphilis has been reported to present differently and progress more rapidly than if HIV-. Syphilis complications involving the brain are also more common in HIV+ patients.

How can I prevent this disease ?

By practising **safer sex**: use a male condom consistently during oral and anal sex; avoid sharing sex toys with people. Be mindful of who you are having sex with and if they are at risk of being infected with syphilis. Having more than one sexual partner and concurrent partnerships also increase the risk of getting syphilis.

How is it treated?



Syphilis will not go away on its own. If it is caught early, it can be treated with 1 injection of benzathine penicillin G or with a longer course of antibiotics.

You should avoid any sexual activity or close sexual contact until 2 weeks after treatment for syphilis finishes. Treatment will also reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others.


The disease

In the early stages of infection, the symptoms of syphilis are usually mild and non severe.

If untreated, syphilis infections can progress to a severe stage where patients experience severe medical complications that affect the heart and the brain. There can also be severe skin and/or bone damage and eye problems.

Ultimately, untreated syphilis can lead to death.

How is it transmitted?



It is usually caught by having sex or being in close sexual contact with an infected person.

It can also be transmitted from a mother to her child during pregnancy and when giving birth.





You can catch syphilis more than once, even if you have been treated for it before.

Where can I get help?

If you think you could have been infected, it is important to seek care as soon as possible. The first step should be to test yourself and to get treated.

There are local facilities that offer these services:

- Fill with the partner health facilities

SST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How accurate is the syphilis self-test?

The syphilis self-test is a highly accurate self-test, similar to HIV self-tests. If you follow the instructions carefully and complete the test properly, the test is 100% likely to detect syphilis, according to the test manufacturer. This is a highly sensitive testing instrument and healthcare professionals trust it to diagnose syphilis.

I am worried about the finger pricking and I do not like the sight of blood.

It is necessary for this self-test to prick your finger to obtain a few drops of your blood. Finger pricking will provoke a slightly uncomfortable pinch on your finger that will only last a second. The retractable lancet that is provided in the kit makes it easy for you to do this.

This slight pain is a downside to the test, however, it is necessary to complete the self-test properly. Finding out your syphilis status, and getting treatment if you need it, will ensure that you avoid the severe complications of syphilis.

How long does it take to complete the self-test?

The syphilis self-test is a relatively short test. The time it takes to complete the test is about 10 minutes, including 5 minutes for the test result to develop.

Is it safe for me to complete the test alone at home?

Testing for syphilis can be a stressful experience and it is a natural reaction to be anxious about it. Syphilis is an easily treatable disease so you should not be worried about your diagnosis: the treatment is straightforward and fast acting. There are also counselling services available for you following confirmatory testing and syphilis treatment.

I am worried about confidentiality as I want to keep my results private.

We assure you that maintaining confidentiality is among the most important aspects of this study. All self-test results are anonymised straightaway. Our professional research staff is highly qualified and experienced in maintaining the privacy of study participants. The study has gone through extensive ethical review to ensure that all research data remains confidential.

Should I tell my friends and family about my result?

We understand that there is stigma attached to a positive STI result. However, we want to reassure you that syphilis is not a serious disease, as it is easily treatable with a single dose of antibiotics. Early diagnosis and treatment is very beneficial to you and to your sexual partner(s). Although this may be a challenge, we also encourage you to disclose your result to your sexual partner(s). This is because if they are infected with syphilis, and you have completed your testing and treatment, they could easily re-infect you. The whole process would then have been for nothing. We highly recommend that you and your partner regularly test for STIs to avoid re-infection.

Do I need to get a second confirmatory test at a health facility?

You must only seek a second confirmatory test in the event that you read a positive result on your self-test. This confirmatory test can be done at one of our partner health facilities. However, please remember that if your self-test result is negative, you can be reassured that you are not infected with syphilis. With a negative self-test, you do not need a confirmatory test.

I am worried that the test kit will not work if I store it at home.

This self-test kit is very stable and is completely safe to use outside of health facilities. The self-test is contained in a sealed pack that can be stored in your own home and that will not lose its usability, even if it is outside of a health facility.