

## Information for pregnant women who have a positive test result for syphilis

This leaflet is for women who, after an antenatal screening test, have been told that they may have had a syphilis infection in the past or may have an infection now.

The leaflet gives information about:

- syphilis and being pregnant;
- how having syphilis can affect your baby; and
- treatment you can get while you are pregnant.

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a serious bacterial infection. When you caught syphilis you may only have been unwell for a short time at first, and you may not have known you had it. But if syphilis is not treated, it can cause you serious problems later in life, including brain damage and heart problems.

### What does my blood test result mean?

A positive test result does not mean you definitely have syphilis. The results of the screening test for syphilis are not always easy to understand – an expert needs to look at the results and ask you questions about yourself and previous infections. Sometimes the result of the screening test will come back positive because you have had syphilis in the past and this has been treated. Also other, less serious diseases, can cause a positive test result.

**Syphilis infections can be treated successfully with antibiotics.**

### What will happen next?

If the screening test is positive, you will be given an urgent appointment with a specialist doctor. This doctor will ask you questions about yourself and any previous infections to help them make a diagnosis. If the doctor thinks you have a syphilis infection they will also decide on the best treatment. They will be able to answer your questions and give you support.

If you have a syphilis infection it is very important that it is treated effectively to reduce the chance of the infection passing to your baby while you are pregnant. If the infection passes to your baby, it could cause miscarriage, stillbirth or abnormalities in your baby.

Your midwife will be able to help you plan your care and discuss any options with you.

### How did I catch syphilis?

You can catch syphilis through unprotected sexual activity (without a condom), including oral sex, with an infected person.

## **What treatment can I have?**

If you have syphilis, the specialist doctor will talk to you about how it will affect you. You will be given antibiotics. After having the antibiotics you will need blood tests to check that the infection has been completely cleared.

## **How will having syphilis affect my pregnancy?**

Having syphilis will not affect the rest of your pregnancy if you are treated. You do not have to have a Caesarean section because of the infection, and you can breastfeed.

## **How will having syphilis affect my baby?**

The earlier in the pregnancy you start having antibiotic treatment, the less likely it is that your baby will catch syphilis. If your infection is diagnosed later in pregnancy, the baby may be affected. A paediatrician will examine your baby soon after it is born. Your baby will need several blood tests to see if he or she has syphilis and needs antibiotics.

If you do not finish the treatment, you are very likely to pass the syphilis infection to your baby during pregnancy. This could be very dangerous for the baby. The baby could die before birth or have a number of serious health problems.

## **Will my baby need antibiotics?**

Your baby may need antibiotics after the birth, especially if you were given antibiotics in late pregnancy, because there may still be a chance that your baby is infected. These antibiotics are usually given by injection.

## **Who should I tell that I have syphilis?**

It is important to tell your past and present sexual partners. They should think about getting tested for syphilis so that they can have treatment if they need to. If you are currently in a relationship, you can ask the specialist doctor about how to explain your syphilis test result to your partner. You can also tell the specialist whether you want your GP to know you have syphilis. Once syphilis has been successfully treated, it will not come back unless you catch it again.

## **Confidentiality**

To give you and your baby the best care, we will need to involve other specialists. Because of this, your midwife will ask you if they can share information about you with these specialists before they become involved with your care.

## Where can I get more information?

You can get more information about syphilis from:

- the hospital midwife who specialises in antenatal screening or the hospital doctor (the obstetrician);
- your nearest NHS sexual-health clinic listed in the phone directory under GUM (genito-urinary medicine) – you can phone your local hospital and ask for the GUM clinic;
- the NHS Direct 24-hour helpline – 0845 46 47;
- the NHS website – [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk);
- the Public Health Wales website – [www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/888/page/43750](http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/888/page/43750);  
and
- NHS Choices – [www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx).



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[www.antenatalscreening.org](http://www.antenatalscreening.org)

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