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This booklet was produced by **Terrence Higgins Trust** for **HIV PREVENTION ENGLAND**, and distributed by:

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The facts about

SYPHILIS.

Sex without a condom increases your likelihood of getting an STI.

WHAT IS IT?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that can be spread during anal, vaginal/ frontal or oral sex, through contact with sores and rashes and when using sex toys. It can be passed on during pregnancy to an unborn baby.

If untreated, syphilis can cause serious heart, brain and nerve problems and even death.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Around 10 days to three months after becoming infected, a painless sore (known as a 'chancre') may appear at the site of infection - usually on the penis or vagina/front hole, in the mouth or around the rectum although these sores can be anywhere on the body.
- A few weeks after the sore disappears you may get a rash on your body, often on the palms of your hands or soles of your feet. You might feel ill, with a fever or headache.

Even if you have no symptoms, or the symptoms go away, without treatment someone can pass on syphilis for up to two years.

Many people have no symptoms in the early stages of infection, so regular check-ups are a good idea.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF?

Using an external or internal condom provides some protection, although protection isn't complete as sores and rashes aren't always in the areas covered by condoms. Using water or silicon based lube with condoms also helps avoid any small tears in the skin which increase the likelihood of infection.

If present, avoid touching the sores or the rash.

Avoid sharing sex toys without putting a new condom over the toy, and use a new condom with each partner when having sex with more than one person at the same time.

Get tested if you are starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

PrEP (HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis) and contraception such as the contraceptive pill offer no protection against sexually transmitted infections.

DoxyPEP is a new tool to help prevent syphilis, which involves taking 200mg of the antibiotic doxycycline no more than 72 hours after sex. Clinical guidelines recommend that doxyPEP is made available for those at increased risk of syphilis, including gay and bisexual men and trans women.

WHERE CAN I GET TESTED?

You can get tested for syphilis at a sexual health centre, by using an online testing service or at a pharmacy if that service is available in your area.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Syphilis is easily treated with antibiotics - don't have sex until the treatment has finished or you could pass on the infection.

Your clinic will ask you to return for another test to confirm the treatment has worked.

They should also talk with you about your recent sexual partners so they can offer them a test for syphilis and treat them if needed.

If you are living with HIV the clinic should recommend syphilis testing at your regular HIV check-ups if you have had a new sexual partner since your last test.