A guide for – Pregnant women who have a positive syphilis blood test

Screening for syphilis is a routine part of care in pregnancy. If syphilis is not treated it can harm you and your baby. Treating syphilis is simple and is also the best way of preventing infection in the unborn child.

Syphilis – the basics

Syphilis is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium (a kind of germ) called *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis can infect almost any part of the body. The most common signs are ulcers on the genitals or in the mouth, skin rashes and swollen lymph glands. Sometimes syphilis produces no symptoms and the infection is only discovered when a blood test is performed. If left untreated it can cause serious health problems later in life.

What does a positive blood test mean?

Understanding the results of a syphilis blood test can be difficult, because the test can be positive for different reasons. These can be:

- You have syphilis which needs to be treated
- You had syphilis in the past which was successfully treated
- Some women who grow up in tropical regions such as Africa and the Caribbean may have a positive blood test due to past infections other than syphilis
- False positive blood tests. You will usually be advised to take another blood test to confirm that this is an incorrect result

What next?

Your midwife or doctor will arrange an urgent appointment for you with a specialist doctor in genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health. To make a correct diagnosis this doctor will ask you questions about your past and current health and may need to examine you. The syphilis blood test will be repeated. The doctor will usually advise you to have tests for other STIs including chlamydia and gonorrhoea.
If you do have syphilis it is important that you receive antibiotic treatment to safeguard your health as well as that of your unborn baby.

How common is syphilis?

Syphilis is not common in the UK, but it is much more common in Africa and Asia. Every year since 2009, about 1 in 700 pregnant women in the UK has had a positive blood test. However, only one in three of these women had syphilis which needed to be treated.

How do you catch syphilis?

Syphilis is passed on through:

- Unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone who has syphilis
- From an infected mother to her unborn baby
- Touching ulcers or weeping rashes in someone who has syphilis
- From blood transfusions, although this is very rare in the UK
- Syphilis cannot be caught by hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or sharing cups, plates or cutlery

What would I notice if I had syphilis?

Some women do not notice anything wrong and the infection is only discovered when they have a blood test. Some women develop one or more of the following:

- Ulcers on the genitals, in the mouth or on other parts of the body
- A skin rash
- Swollen lymph glands

Symptoms may occur as early as a week after infection, but sometimes it takes many months before the person notices a problem.

How do I get tested for syphilis?

The test is done on a blood sample. The doctor or nurse will advise you about this.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is curable and easy to treat with the antibiotic penicillin, usually given by injection into the muscle of your buttock. The number of injections you need depends on how long you have been infected and how many weeks pregnant you are when treatment is started. If you are allergic to penicillin, you will be given a different antibiotic.

Can syphilis affect my pregnancy?

Yes. Miscarriages or stillbirths are more likely to happen if you are not treated or you receive treatment late in pregnancy. However, having syphilis does not mean that you need a caesarean section. You can still breastfeed your baby once you have completed your treatment.

Can syphilis affect my baby?

Yes. Syphilis infection can spread from a mother to her unborn child. This is known as congenital syphilis (CS). Some babies with CS look completely normal at birth and the diagnosis is only made by doing a test on a sample of the baby's blood. Some babies with CS have damaged bones and teeth or problems with their sight or hearing. Treating syphilis as early as possible in pregnancy gives the best chance of preventing babies from being infected.

What chance is there of a baby having congenital syphilis?

CS is rare in the UK, with only about 10 cases diagnosed each year. It's not easy to predict which babies will get CS, but it is more likely to happen in the following situations:

- When the pregnant woman receives no antibiotic treatment
- When the pregnant woman is treated with an antibiotic other than penicillin (e.g. if she is allergic to penicillin)
- When the woman's treatment is completed less than 30 days before the birth of her baby

How will we know if my baby has congenital syphilis?

A doctor specialising in the care of new born babies (a paediatrician) will examine your baby soon after she/he is born to check for signs of syphilis infection. Your baby will also have syphilis blood tests.

Will my baby need treatment?

Some babies do need treatment, but this is not always the case. The doctors looking after you and your baby will decide whether it needs antibiotics. If your baby does need treatment he or she will need to stay in hospital for 10 days of antibiotic treatment given through a cannula (or drip) placed in a vein.

What about my partner?

As syphilis is an STI, it is important that your sexual partner is tested for syphilis and other STIs. If you have had other sexual partners in the past, some of these may also need testing. The doctor will advise you about this.

When can I have sex again?

You must not have sex again until you and your partner have been treated. The doctor will advise you when it is safe.

What happens if my syphilis is not treated?

If syphilis is not treated there is a risk of damage to the nervous system (the brain, spinal cord and nerves) and also the heart. These complications usually take many years to develop and are seen very rarely in this country because treatment is so effective.

How will I know I have been cured of syphilis?

This is shown by blood tests which are taken after you have completed treatment. Your doctor will explain this to you.

Can I catch syphilis again?

Yes you can. Having syphilis once gives no protection in future.
To prevent this it is important that your partner has blood tests. Should your partner test positive, it is important that you do not have sex until you have both been treated.

What about my other children?

If you already have children, it may be necessary for them to have blood tests to see if they were infected when you were pregnant with them. Your doctor will advise you about this.

Will my family doctor know about my syphilis?

Yes. It is important for your family doctor to know as she/he is responsible for the future care of you and your baby.

This leaflet is produced by the Clinical Effectiveness Group of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH). Contents are based on information in the UK National Guideline on the Management of Syphilis 2015.

More information:
www.bashh.org/guidelines

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