

Backgrounder

Syphilis

- Syphilis is known as “the great imitator” because the symptoms often look like other diseases.
- Early symptoms may include a painless, open sore where the infection entered their body, a rash, muscle aches, fever, or swollen lymph nodes. Many people infected with syphilis will not have any symptoms.
- Left untreated, syphilis can damage the heart, brain and other organs. In some cases, it can cause death.
- Syphilis is transmitted through oral, vaginal, or anal sex, contact with open sores, or from pregnant mothers to unborn babies.

Syphilis in Nunavut

- Nunavut’s syphilis outbreak began in May 2012. Since that time, there have been 184 cases of syphilis diagnosed in Nunavut.
- There were 31 cases in 2012, 59 cases in 2013, and 94 cases in 2014.
- Iqaluit is the epicenter of the outbreak, although syphilis is spreading to other communities and regions in the territory.

Syphilis Public Awareness Campaign

- The Department of Health has launched a new syphilis public awareness campaign.
- This campaign focuses on informing people about what syphilis is and encouraging condom use and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing.
- The tagline for this campaign is “Don’t let sex mean syphilis. Wear condoms. Get tested.”
- The campaign includes posters, television and radio public service announcements, social media, a memo to health care providers, and a patient education resource.

Sexual Health

- STI and teen pregnancy rates in Nunavut are the highest in Canada.
- STIs often have no signs or symptoms. You can have an STI without knowing it.
- STIs can have very serious complications. Untreated chlamydia and gonorrhea may cause infertility. Untreated syphilis can damage the heart, brain, and other organs, and may even cause death.

Sexual Health Promotion Messages

- Every sexually active person can take measures to reduce their risk.
- Using condoms is the most effective way for sexually active people to reduce the risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancy. Condoms are available for free at health centres, Public Health, and other recreational and business locations throughout Nunavut.
- People who are in a new relationship or who don’t know their partner’s sexual history should be tested for STIs before they start having sex, even if they plan to use condoms.

- People who have more than one sexual partner, have sex while drunk or high, trade sex for alcohol, drugs, or a place to stay, or use condoms incorrectly or not at all should be tested for STIs every three to six months.
- Testing for all STIs, including syphilis, is available at local health centres or Public Health. STI tests are free and confidential. Syphilis and most other STIs are easily treated.
- It is possible to get STIs, including syphilis, more than once if sexual partners do not receive treatment at the same time.
- People with an STI should tell their health care providers about all of their sexual partners so they can also receive treatment.
- For more information about sexual health, STIs, and safe sex, visit the Department of Health's sexual health website at www.irespectmyself.ca, or speak with your health care provider.