

# On the rise

## Thirty percent of all new syphilis cases in BC are among HIV-positive men who have sex with men

by Glenn Doupe and Dr. Mark Gilbert

In the past five years, there has been a steady rise in syphilis cases among gay and bisexual men in British Columbia. Last year, 155 cases of new infectious syphilis were reported in gay and bisexual men—47 percent of all syphilis cases.

Many of those cases were in HIV-positive men, with the greatest number between the ages of 30 and 59 years. Of those, 65 percent of cases were gay and bisexual men. That translates to a whopping 30 percent of all new syphilis cases. Other North American cities have reported similar trends. While the reason for this is unknown, one possible explanation is that serosorting among HIV-positive men—that is, seeking out other HIV-positive men for unprotected sex as an HIV prevention strategy—is a factor.

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the *Treponema pallidum* bacteria, and is transmitted through vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Symptoms come in stages, which can vary in severity from person to person. Symptoms in the later stages of syphilis can mimic many other diseases. Because of this, it's often misdiagnosed. Syphilis can also occur without symptoms, so you and your sex partners can have syphilis without knowing it.

### Symptoms sometimes go unnoticed

The earliest symptom of syphilis, during the primary stage, is a painless, open sore called a chancre. It's usually the size of a dime with hard raised edges, and it oozes clear fluid, which contains the

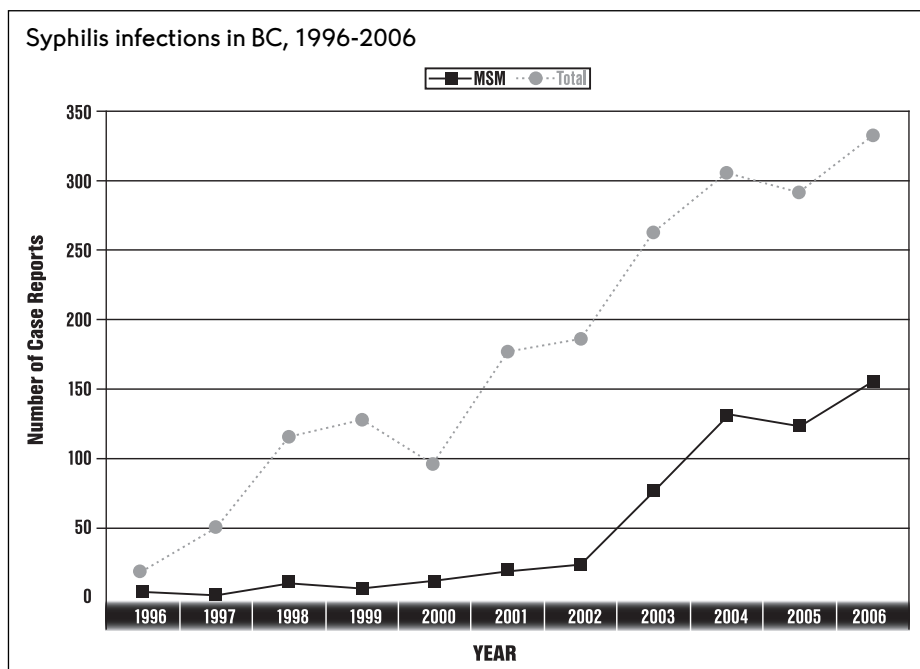
syphilis bacteria. It's infectious to touch. A chancre can appear anywhere your body touches someone else's chancre, though it usually appears on the genitals, in the anus, or in the mouth. Because it's painless, it's often unnoticed, and many people who are diagnosed with syphilis don't recall having a chancre.

The chancre will go away without treatment after about a month. Then you'll enter a secondary stage, where the most common symptom is a rash covering a large portion of your body. This rash can sometimes appear on the palms of your hands or soles of your feet. The rash isn't itchy or infectious. There can also be ulcerations around your genitals during the secondary stage. These ulcers are infectious in a similar way that a chancre is.

Untreated syphilis can lead to deep bone pain, permanent vision or hearing loss, and neurologic problems such as stroke, which can happen quite early or late in the course of the infection. However, the disease is easily treated with antibiotics once identified.

Syphilis seems to progress faster in people who are HIV-positive. PWAs tend to exhibit symptoms in later stages of the disease, compared to people who are HIV-negative.

If you're HIV-positive, untreated syphilis will increase your viral load, making it easier to transmit HIV. And if you're HIV-negative, having syphilis can increase your risk of HIV. This occurs for two reasons: Firstly, mucous membranes that normally protect you from HIV become damaged because of a chancre. Secondly, many white blood cells gather at the infection site (the syphilis chancre)



and HIV likes to attach itself to these cells. It's not uncommon to give someone an HIV diagnosis and a syphilis diagnosis at the same time.

**Protecting yourself—and others**

A specific syphilis blood test at your family physician's office, community health centre, or STI clinic will determine if you have syphilis. Syphilis will take time to show up in your blood after you've been infected. The shortest time this could take is nine days, and the longest time is three months; it varies with each individual. Occasionally, the syphilis bacteria can be seen with a microscope in a sample of fluid taken from a chancre.

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Condom use can reduce your risk of becoming infected with syphilis. Syphilis can also spread through oral sex—as the giver or receiver. If you think you might be at risk of syphilis

infection, the best way to find out is to get tested, and to test frequently if you have an active sex life. In addition to getting treated faster, this will also help prevent you from passing syphilis to your sex partners and avoid complications. ⊕

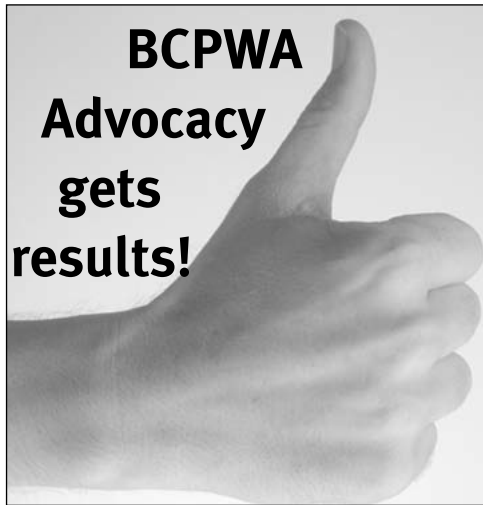
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**Get more details, get tested**  
 For more information about syphilis, visit [www.stiresource.com](http://www.stiresource.com). In Vancouver, to get tested, drop by the Bute Street Clinic at 1170 Bute Street, tel: 604.660.7949.



**BCPWA  
 Advocacy  
 gets  
 results!**

The BCPWA Society's Advocacy Program continues to work hard to secure funds and benefits for our members. The income secured for June 2007 and July 2007 is:

- **\$28,000** in debt forgiveness.
- **\$10,400** in housing, health benefits, dental and long-term disability benefits.
- **\$225** monthly nutritional supplement benefits
- **\$2,250** in ongoing monthly nutritional supplement benefit for children