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Press Release

Warning as syphilis cases increase

NHS Tees is warning people about the dangers of syphilis following a rise in cases of the devastating disease.

Anyone who has unprotected sex with casual partners or strangers is at high risk of developing syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The condition is especially significant in pregnant women where infection can be passed on to the unborn child leading to miscarriage, still birth or problems with the child's development.

Public health experts today urged anyone who thinks they may be at risk to contact their GP or sexual health clinic.

Syphilis can lead to serious health problems but it can be treated at any stage with antibiotics. If left untreated syphilis can result in serious heart, respiratory tract or central nervous system damage.

Syphilis is a disease which was thought to be almost wiped out but public health experts have warned that cases across Teesside are on the increase.

Professor Peter Kelly, Executive Director of Public Health for NHS Tees said syphilis has risen sharply in the last year.

"There has been a four fold increase in the number of syphilis cases detected with more young women being affected," he said.

"Syphilis is a devastating disease which can lead to serious health problems to the infected individual, their sexual contacts and an unborn child (in pregnant women). It is easily preventable and treatment is simple and effective.

"Unprotected sex, especially with casual partners, is the biggest risk for syphilis. Social networking sites are making it easier for people to meet up for casual sex. It is important that people avoid high risk sexual behaviours and practise safe sex to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections.

Issued by the Communication and Engagement Team for the four Primary Care Trusts on Teesside.

For information, photographs and interviews, please contact **Marie Levy**, Press Officer on **01642 352623** or by e-mail: marie.levy@middlesbroughpct.nhs.uk

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“We’re urging people to contact their GP or their local sexual health clinic for syphilis testing if they are at high risk. For pregnant women it is important to attend for antenatal screening as this can identify syphilis early and allow treatment to be carried out.”

A number of general and targeted campaigns are being carried out to increase syphilis awareness and syphilis screening across the NHS Tees area.

Nationally the highest rates of syphilis are seen in women aged 20 to 24 and men aged 25 to 34. In 2008 there were 3,588 cases diagnosed in sexual health clinics across the UK.

Symptoms of syphilis are not specific and depend on the disease stage. At first it is possible to have no symptoms or to have one or more painless but highly infectious sores at the site of infection.

For more information on syphilis visit www.hpa.org.uk

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For more information please call Press and Public Relations Officer Marie Levy on 01642 352623 or email marie.levy@middlesbroughpct.nhs.uk

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