

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It has often been called “the great imitator” because so many of the signs and symptoms are so much like those of other diseases.

How do I get syphilis?

Syphilis is spread from person to person by direct contact with a syphilis sore. Syphilis sores most commonly appear on the genitals or the rectum, but they can also appear on, in, or around the mouth, or on any other body part that comes in contact with a syphilis sore. Pregnant women can pass syphilis on to their babies. Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, yet remain at risk for late complications if they are not treated. Although transmission appears to occur from persons with sores who are in the primary or secondary stage, many of these sores are unrecognized. Thus, most transmission is from persons who are unaware of their infection.

Primary Stage

The primary stage of syphilis is usually marked by the appearance of a single sore (called a chancre), but there may be multiple sores. The time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptom can range from 10 to 90 days (average 21 days). The chancre is usually firm, round, small, and painless. It appears at the spot where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts 3 to 6 weeks, and it heals without treatment. However, if adequate treatment is not administered, the infection progresses to the secondary stage.

Secondary Stage

Skin rash and mucous membrane lesions characterize the secondary stage. This stage typically starts with the development of a rash on one or more areas of the body. The rash usually does not cause itching. Rashes associated with secondary syphilis can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. The characteristic rash of secondary syphilis may appear as rough, red, or reddish brown spots both on the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. However, rashes with a different appearance may occur on other parts of the body, sometimes resembling rashes caused by other diseases. Sometimes rashes associated with secondary syphilis are so faint that they are not noticed. In addition to rashes, symptoms of

secondary syphilis may include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will resolve with or without treatment, but without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and late stages of disease.

Late Stage

The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when secondary symptoms disappear. Without treatment, the infected person will continue to have syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms; infection remains in the body. In the late stages of syphilis, it may subsequently damage the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This internal damage may show up many years later. Signs and symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

How do I know if I have syphilis?

A simple blood test will tell if a person has syphilis. Since untreated syphilis in a woman can infect or even kill her baby, every pregnant woman should be tested for syphilis.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

In the early stage, syphilis is relatively easy to cure. A single shot of penicillin, an antibiotic, into muscle tissue will usually cure someone who has had syphilis for less than a year. If a person has had syphilis longer than a year, it may take several doses. If you are allergic to penicillin, there are other antibiotics available. There are no over-the-counter drugs or home remedies that can kill syphilis. While the antibiotics kill the bacteria that cause syphilis, they will not repair the damage already done.

I had syphilis before. Am I immune?

Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again. If both you and your sex partner have syphilis, and only one of you gets treated, that partner can still get it again from the untreated partner. Syphilis sores are not always visible; just because someone looks like they don't have it doesn't mean you can't get it from them.

What is the link between syphilis and HIV?

Sores caused by syphilis make it easier for HIV to enter the body; likewise, someone with HIV will be less able to fight off a syphilis infection. Someone with syphilis who is exposed to HIV is between twice and 5 times as likely to become infected with HIV as someone who does not have HIV.

How can syphilis be prevented?

The surest way to avoid being infected with STD's, including syphilis, is to either abstain from sexual contact or to be in a committed long term relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. It is important for sex partners to discuss their STD status and history so that proper action can be taken.

Avoiding alcohol and drug use will decrease the risk of STD transmission, as these may lead to risky sexual behavior.

Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis and other STD infection, if the condom fully covers the syphilis sore.

Washing the genitals or urinating after sex will not reduce the risk of STD infection. Any unusual discharge, sore, or rash, particularly in the groin area, should be a signal to refrain from having sex and to see a doctor immediately.

Where can I find more information?

You may either contact the Kansas City, Missouri Health Department at (816) 513-6008 and ask for Communicable Disease Prevention, or you may visit the CDC website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/>