

SYPHILIS

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis is passed on when a person comes in contact with a syphilitic sore, known as a chancre—typically during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Syphilis can also be passed on during pregnancy or childbirth from a pregnant person to their baby.

Most cases of syphilis reported in the United States are in men, with the majority cases in gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). However, there has been a rise in cases of syphilis in infants—called congenital syphilis—in recent years. This can be avoided if the pregnant person is treated, so it is important for all pregnant people to be tested for syphilis at least once during pregnancy.

Symptoms of Syphilis

Syphilis normally shows up in stages: primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary.

Primary Stage

The first symptom is a painless sore (chancre) that shows up between 10-90 days after exposure. The sore can appear on the genitals (penis, scrotum, vulva), or in places harder to find (anus, rectum, inside of the vagina or the mouth). The sore can last up to six weeks and will go away without treatment. However, it is still important to obtain treatment. A person is highly contagious during the primary stage.

Secondary Stage

If left untreated, syphilis can move to the secondary stage. Symptoms in this stage include a rough, reddish-brown rash or spots on the palms of the hands or/and the soles of the feet. Other

OVERVIEW

- Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a bacteria.
- Syphilis can be treated more easily if it is caught early. If syphilis is untreated, the infection can cause serious damage and even death.
- A pregnant person can pass syphilis on to their baby. Syphilis during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, and infants born with syphilis can have lifelong health issues. This is why all pregnant people should be tested for syphilis.

symptoms could include headache, fever, sore throat, weight loss, swollen lymph glands, and generally not feeling well. The symptoms will go away on their own, but the disease will still be present if untreated.

Latent and Tertiary Stages

The latent stage begins when the primary and secondary stage symptoms are gone and the infection has been left untreated. During this stage, which can last for as long as 20 years, there are no symptoms, but syphilis is still there. During the tertiary stage, untreated syphilis can result in damage to organs and systems such as the brain, eyes, heart, bones, and joints. The damage caused by untreated syphilis can even lead to death.

Getting Tested

There are two types of blood tests available for syphilis—both types are needed to confirm that a person has syphilis.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following people get tested for syphilis:

- All pregnant people. CDC suggests all pregnant people should be tested for syphilis at their first prenatal visit. Some women may require testing at 28 weeks and also delivery.
- Men who have sex with men.
- People living with HIV
- People who have partner(s) who have tested positive for syphilis.

Treatment

Early treatment for someone with primary, secondary or early latent syphilis is usually one shot of penicillin. People with late latent or tertiary stage syphilis tend to require treatment for a longer period of time.

Anyone being treated for syphilis should not have sex until all the sores or rashes are gone, and should tell all sex partners so they can get tested and treated.

Even though syphilis can be cured with treatment, a person can get syphilis again if exposed.

Syphilis and HIV

Having syphilis makes it easier to give or get HIV. Having a sore from syphilis may allow HIV to more easily enter the body. Other STIs can also increase your chances of getting HIV, so it's important to know how to prevent infection.

Telling Your Partner

It can be hard to tell a partner that you have syphilis, but keep in mind that your partner can have it and not know. If you need help telling your partner(s), there are several services online that will notify your partners anonymously.

Staying Healthy

You can protect yourself from syphilis in the same ways you protect yourself from other STIs.

- Talk to your partner about safer sex and how you can protect yourselves against STIs.
- Have condoms on hand, and be ready to use them. Use a condom when you have vaginal, anal and oral sex, or any genital-to-genital or genital-to-anal contact.
- Get tested—and bring your partner with you to get tested too.
- If you have any symptoms of an STI or have a sexual partner that was diagnosed, go to your healthcare provider or clinic as soon as possible. YesMeansTest.org has a clinic finder if you need help locating a provider.

Learn More

Learn more about syphilis and other STIs from the American Sexual Health Association, a trusted nonprofit organization that has advocated on behalf of those at risk for STIs for more than a century. Our websites include:

www.ashasexualhealth.org

www.iwannaknow.org

www.nccc-online.org

www.askexpertsnow.com

www.YESmeansTEST.org

