

Syphilis

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a bacteria (germ) called *Treponema pallidum*. Symptoms are divided into 4 stages.

Syphilis can be cured if is treated. Untreated, syphilis can cause long-term health problems.

Who Can Get Syphilis?

Anyone who is sexually active can become infected. You should get tested if you:

- are pregnant
- are HIV positive
- are a man who has sex with men
- have partner(s) who tested positive for syphilis
- are sexually active in an area with high number of people with syphilis.

How is Syphilis Spread?

Syphilis is spread from:

- direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal or oral sex
 - Sores can be found on the penis, vagina, anus, in the rectum, or on the lips and in the mouth.
- an infected mother to her unborn baby.

What are the Symptoms of Syphilis?

Symptoms can look like many other diseases. Syphilis typically follows 4 stages that can last for weeks, months or years.

■ Primary (first) stage

- A single sore appears. It is usually firm, round and painless. It appears where the syphilis entered the body and can be hard to find.
- The sore (there may be a few) lasts 3 to 6 weeks and heals on its own.
- Without treatment, syphilis will move to the next stage.

■ Secondary (second) stage

- Skin rash or lesions appear in the mouth, anus or vagina.
 - The rash is on one or more areas of the body. It can look rough, red or reddish brown spots. Not itchy, the rash shows as spots on the palms of the hand and bottoms of the feet.
 - The lesions are in warm, moist areas such as the mouth, underarm or groin. They are large, raised and gray or white.
- Other symptoms are fever, swollen lymph nodes, sore throat, patchy hair loss, weight loss and headaches.
- The rash will heal on its own.
- Without treatment, syphilis will move to the next stage.

(over)

■ Latent (hidden) stage

- This stage starts when the symptoms of the first two stages go away.
- Without treatment, the infection stays in the body even if there are no symptoms.

■ Tertiary (third) stage

- This stage occurs in people who have not been treated. Syphilis can appear 10 to 30 years after the infection started.
- Syphilis can damage the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, bones and other internal organs. It can cause paralysis and dementia.
- Syphilis can cause death.

The average time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptom is 21 days but it can range from 10 to 90 days.

How is Syphilis Found?

Your health care provider can tell if you have syphilis by testing your blood.

How is Syphilis Treated?

Your health care provider will treat you with an antibiotic (medicine), usually at least one shot of penicillin.

How Does Syphilis Affect an Unborn Baby?

A woman untreated can pass the germ to her unborn baby. This can lead to giving birth to a baby with a low birth weight, giving birth early, or giving birth to a baby who dies shortly after birth.

An infected baby may be born without symptoms. If not treated right away, the baby can have seizures, problems with his or her eyes and ears, developmental delays, or possibly die.

How Long can the Germ be Spread?

A syphilis infection can last for years if it is not treated. It's important that you call your health care provider if you are in the at-risk group or if you have concerns about your sex partner(s).

You can get syphilis any time you are exposed — even if you've been treated for it before.

What Prevents the Spread of the Germ?

- Use a condom (male or female) and a water- or silicone-based lubricant during sex. This will also help protect you from other STDs.
- Have sex with one partner in a committed relationship. This means the two of you only have sex with each other.
- If you have syphilis, tell your current and past partners. Ask your health care provider if you need help in contacting any sex partners and referring them for treatment.
- Call your health care provider if you have any unusual discharge, sore or rash.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.