

Syphilis

Syphilis is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by a type of bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*. It can spread from person to person by physical contact during vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Usually, symptoms show up 2-12 weeks after being exposed to syphilis.

Possible early symptoms: (2-12 weeks after becoming infected). This is called primary syphilis.

- Sore called a chancre (shank-er). There may be more than one. They are usually not painful. They may be on the penis, scrotum, vaginal lips, anus, or mouth. Men who have sex with men may not be aware of any symptoms because the chancre is painless and may be in the mouth or anus or rectum. Infected women may not be aware of any symptoms because sores may be inside the vagina. **Even without treatment these sores will go away after several weeks, but you will still be infected and can infect sex partners**
- Lymph glands near the sore may be swollen, and are not painful.

Possible later symptoms: (4-12 weeks after becoming infected). This is called secondary syphilis.

- Flu-like illness with sore throat, headache, and fever.
- Skin rash all over the body, and sometimes on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet (not itchy).
- Warty-like growths may appear on the genitals or around the anus.
- Grayish/whitish patches may appear on the tongue or throat along with sore throat
- Patchy hair loss may be noticed.
- Nervous system symptoms: neck stiffness, nausea, vomiting, seizures, hearing loss and a red, painful eye. **Even without treatment these symptoms will go away after several weeks, but you are still infected** and can infect sex partners.

How would I know if I have syphilis?

- If you have a sore on your genitals, your anus or have a skin rash, have an STD check. There are special tests available at City Clinic to diagnose syphilis on the day of your visit.
- Blood tests during the secondary stage of syphilis are highly reliable and will confirm the infection.
- Oftentimes, primary and secondary syphilis go unnoticed, but a blood test would be diagnostic.

Is syphilis dangerous?

- Syphilis and HIV are commonly found together. The sores of primary syphilis are very effective methods of acquiring HIV and transmitting HIV.
- If you have syphilis and are HIV negative, you would need an HIV test at the same time your syphilis is diagnosed. If your test is negative, you should talk to your provider about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).
- If you are HIV positive and not on HIV medication, syphilis could worsen your HIV disease.
- Syphilis may infect the brain, eye and ear resulting in severe headache, stiff neck, seizures, a painful, red eye with decreased vision and hearing loss.
- Pregnant women with syphilis can pass the syphilis to the baby which could be very dangerous for the baby.

How is syphilis treated?

- Penicillin cures syphilis. Other medicine can be used if you are truly allergic to penicillin.
- We sometimes find a positive test for syphilis in persons who are no longer sexual. They could have been infected many years ago. We recommend treatment for them because some people with long term, untreated

syphilis can develop brain, heart, and nervous system damage. At this late stage of syphilis a person is not contagious to sex partners.

What can I do if I have syphilis?

- Your sex partner(s) must be examined and treated. If not treated, they can give the infection back to you, or infect others.
- Your syphilis blood test may stay positive (not normal) even after treatment. We will give you a card that shows proper treatment was given to cure your syphilis once your treatment is completed. You are no longer contagious once treatment is completed.
- You will need to be evaluated three months after treatment, and then regularly during the first year of your diagnosis and treatment. This would include an exam and blood tests.

If you get infected with syphilis and do not know the HIV status of the sexual partner who infected you, you should be concerned about your increased risk of HIV. Talk to your clinician. Condoms (male or female) can help protect you against HIV, syphilis and other STDs. If you are HIV-negative and have syphilis, ask your provider about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to help protect you from HIV.

How do I avoid getting syphilis?

- Plan ahead! Protect yourself!
- If you're thinking of having sex with a new partner:
 - Talk about STDs.
 - Talk about using male or female condoms.
 - Suggest an STD check-up for both of you before having sex.

What can I expect when I am diagnosed with syphilis?

A Department of Public Health Disease Control Investigator will contact you. They will help you better understand your infection and provide you with information needed to protect your future health and help get your partners treated.

For more information:

Please talk with your City Clinic clinician or your own health care provider. The following websites also offer helpful information:

General STD

www.ashsexualhealth.org (also in Espanol)
www.cdc.gov/std/
www.sfcityclinic.org
www.sfsi.org/

Teens

www.iwannaknow.org
www.amplifyyourvoice.org (also in Espanol)
www.kidshealth.org/teen (also in Espanol)
www.scarleteen.com

Contraception and STD/sex info

www.bedsider.org
www.scarleteen.com

For a STD check-up or treatment,
see your doctor, local clinic, or come to:



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