

FACT SHEET

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It can cause serious health problems if left untreated. Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). There are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage.

How is it spread?

You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. You can find sores on or around the penis, vagina, or anus, or in the rectum, on the lips, or in the mouth. Syphilis can spread from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

You **cannot** get syphilis through casual contact with objects such as toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools or sharing clothes.

What are the symptoms?

- Primary stage - development of a painless firm round lesion where the virus entered the body, usually in, on, or around the penis, vagina, anus, rectum, lips, or in the mouth.
- Secondary stage - skin rash, fever, swollen glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headache, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue.

- Tertiary stage - (Occurs 10-30 years after infection begins) difficulty with coordination, paralysis, numbness, blindness, and dementia

How is it prevented?

- Abstinence from sex is the best form of protection.
- Using latex condoms will offer some protection.
- Being in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and known to be uninfected is another form of prevention.

How is it treated?

In the early stages of syphilis, a single injection of penicillin is the treatment of choice. More injections may be needed for someone with the disease longer than a year. Treatment will prevent further damage but won't repair damage that has already occurred.

People who receive syphilis treatment must abstain from sex until the syphilis sores are completely healed. People with syphilis must notify their sex partners so that they also can be tested and receive treatment, if necessary.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

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