

Fact Sheet

SYPHILIS

What is it?

Syphilis is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*.

How do you get it?

You can get syphilis, like other STIs, during unprotected sex (anal, oral or vaginal). When you have direct contact with a syphilis sore, the bacteria can enter the bloodstream through a tear in the skin or mucous membrane. You can also get it if you share needles to inject drugs. A pregnant woman can pass it to the fetus growing inside her.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who have syphilis have no symptoms. They can pass on the infection to their sexual partner(s) without knowing it.

When the bacteria enter the body, the disease goes through a few stages. Symptoms may appear 3–90 days after sexual contact with an infected person. Even if symptoms go away you should still be tested for syphilis and treated if you have it.

In the **first or primary stage**, a painless sore called a chancre may appear on the penis, buttocks, anus, vagina, throat, or at any other part of the body where the bacteria entered. Many people do not notice the sore because it is painless. The sore can heal without any treatment. However, without treatment the infection may continue to the next stage.

The **secondary stage** usually occurs 4 to 10 weeks after the chancre appears. A rash may appear on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet or on any part of the body. In some cases, there is patchy hair loss, muscle and joint pain or swollen glands. Again these symptoms may disappear without treatment. Without treatment the infection may continue to the next stage.

In the **early latent and late latent stages** there are no symptoms. Once a person has had the infection for one year or more, they are in the late latent stage. They are no longer able to pass the infection on to others.

Some people who have never received treatment may enter the **tertiary stage** of syphilis 10 to 20 years after they were first infected. However, if a person also has HIV these tertiary stage symptoms can appear earlier. The tertiary stage of syphilis can cause serious heart, brain, liver, eye and bone disease.

How do you know that you have it and what is the treatment?

A blood test is used to diagnose syphilis. It can take 2–12 weeks for the infection to appear in the blood. This is not a routine blood test. If you think you may have been infected, tell the doctor or clinic, and ask for a blood test. It is important to treat syphilis as early as possible. Treatment will prevent serious complications for you. It will also keep you from passing the infection to someone else. Antibiotics will cure syphilis. Even though you have been treated and cured, if you have syphilis blood tests in the future they may appear "positive" for life.

Fact Sheet

Are there any complications?

Without treatment, the symptoms will go away, but the disease may continue to spread through the body. Many years later, it may cause severe damage to the heart, brain, liver, bones and eyes.

If not treated, a pregnant woman can pass syphilis to the fetus growing inside her. Her baby may develop serious health problems or even die.

What about sexual partners?

All sexual and needle-sharing partners need to be checked, tested and then treated if they are infected. A public health nurse can help an infected person notify their partner(s).

- In the primary stage, it is important to tell partners within the past 3 months even if they have no symptoms yet.
- In the secondary stage, all partners within the past 6 months need to be told.
- In the early latent stage, all partners within 1 year of diagnosis need to be told.
- In the late latent stage, long-term partners need to know. Children may need to be checked and tested as well.

Do you need more testing?

Yes. Follow-up blood tests for syphilis are very important. The results of these blood tests will show if the treatment was effective or if you need further treatment. The clinic will tell you when to return for follow-up blood tests.

Remember:

- Avoid sex (anal, oral, or vaginal) with anyone who has a sore(s) in the genital area.
- If you already have syphilis, avoid sex (anal, oral or vaginal), even with a condom, until 2 weeks after treatment.
- If you have an untreated STI like syphilis, it is easier to get HIV from a person who has it or transmit HIV to another person
- It is easier to get HIV from oral sex if you already have syphilis.
- Do not share needles.
- Pregnant women should have a blood test for syphilis.
- It is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to get tested for other STIs.

**For more information
call the AIDS and Sexual Health InfoLine at 416-392-2437**

SAFER SEX

To reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI),
use a condom every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex.

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