

Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. Syphilis has four stages. It is easy to treat with medicine in the early stages. Untreated syphilis can damage your body's organs, leading to severe illness and even death. Untreated syphilis can also cause stillbirth (babies who are born dead) or infant death soon after birth.

Q: How do you get syphilis?

A: Syphilis is spread:

- Through direct contact with a syphilis sore or rash during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Sores can be on or in the external genitals, vagina, anus, or rectum. They can also be on the lips or tongue or in the mouth.
- From a mother to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

A: Each stage of syphilis has different signs and symptoms.

- **First (primary) stage of syphilis.** A single sore appears in the first stage. It appears at the spot where the infection entered your body. In this stage, syphilis can be passed to others.
- **Second (secondary) stage of syphilis.** The second stage can start as the sore is healing or up to several weeks after it has healed. Some or all of these signs or symptoms can appear:
 - Skin rash with rough, red, or reddish-brown spots on your body. The rash usually does not itch.
 - Sores on the throat, mouth, or cervix
 - Fever
 - Swollen glands

- Sore throat
- Patchy hair loss
- Headaches and muscle aches
- Weight loss
- Tiredness

- **Inactive (latent) stage of syphilis.** The inactive stage starts when symptoms from the first and second stages go away. During this stage, the infection lives in your body even though you have no signs or symptoms.
- **Late (tertiary) stage of syphilis.** The late stage can happen 10 to 20 years after a person first becomes infected. In the late stage, the disease can lead to nerve problems, paralysis, blindness, deafness, dementia, and other health problems. You will only reach the late stage of syphilis if you do not receive treatment earlier.

Q: What should I do if I have syphilis?

A: If you have syphilis:

- **See a doctor or nurse as soon as possible.** Penicillin will treat syphilis, but it will not fix any permanent damage done to your internal organs.
- **Take all of your medicine.** Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the penicillin. If symptoms continue after treatment, see your doctor or nurse.
- **Tell your sex partner(s)** so they can be tested and treated. If they are not tested and treated you could get syphilis again.
- **Avoid any sexual activity while you are being treated for syphilis.** Don't have sexual contact until the syphilis sores are completely healed.

- After you have completed treatment for syphilis, **get retested after 6 months and 12 months.** Your doctor or nurse may recommend more frequent follow-up tests.
- **Get tested for HIV.** If your test result is negative, ask your doctor or nurse if you need to be retested and when.

Q: How can I prevent syphilis?

A: The best way to prevent syphilis or any STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.

If you do have sex, lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps:

- **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent STIs when you have sex. Because a man does not need to ejaculate (come) to spread syphilis, make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Also, other methods of birth control, such as birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.
- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about the test results before you have sex.
- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for STIs. After being tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.
- **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Don't douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protect you from infection. This may increase your risk of getting STIs.
- **Don't abuse alcohol or drugs.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs increases risky behavior and may put you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from every single type of STI.

For more information...

For more information on syphilis, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

American Sexual Health Association
800-227-8922 • www.ashastd.org

Planned Parenthood
800-230-7526 • www.plannedparenthood.org

This fact sheet was reviewed by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) staff.

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