



Syphilis Fact Sheet

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the syphilis bacterium (*Treponema pallidum*). Syphilis is often called “the great imitator” because so many of the signs and symptoms are the same as many other diseases.

How does syphilis spread?

Syphilis can spread during sex (including oral or anal sex), especially unprotected sex. Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. These sores are usually on the penis, in the vagina or on the anus or in the rectum. Pregnant women with syphilis can spread it to their unborn baby.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Syphilis has several different stages.

Primary Syphilis

During the contagious stage (“primary syphilis”), people get painless sores that are very contagious. This is when syphilis spreads. These usually last for 3-6 weeks and heal whether someone gets treated or not.

Secondary Syphilis

When the syphilis sores start to go away, people can go on to secondary syphilis. This stage is when people with syphilis get a rash on the hands or feet (or the rest of the body). Sometimes the rash is noticeable and sometimes it is faint. People can also get sores in their mouths, underarms or by the groin. This stage of syphilis goes away whether someone gets treated or not.

Latent and Late Syphilis

The next major stage is the latent or “hidden” stage. Latent syphilis is when a person has syphilis but is not contagious. This stage can last for years. Late stage syphilis occurs 10-30 years after primary and secondary syphilis. Symptoms of late syphilis include muscle coordination problems, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. Late syphilis causes damage to the bones, internal organs, nerves and the brain and can lead to insanity and death.

How long does it take for symptoms to appear?

Usually it takes about 3 weeks for symptoms (syphilis sores) to appear, but it can be anywhere from a week to three months.

How long can a person with syphilis infection spread it to his or her partners?

People with syphilis can infect others until their sores heal.

How does syphilis affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

Moms with syphilis can pass it to their unborn babies. Babies with syphilis can be born dead, or be born prematurely, with low birth weight or with other problems (deafness, retardation). Some babies may develop symptoms after they are born. If they are not treated right away, they can die.

Women who are pregnant and at risk of syphilis should have an exam, get tested and treated (if needed) by a health care provider as soon as possible. All women who are pregnant should get medical care while they are pregnant.



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How is syphilis diagnosed?

Your health care provider can use laboratory tests to see if you have syphilis. Some tests are blood tests. Other tests involve taking a swab from a syphilis sore and looking for syphilis under a microscope.

What is the link between syphilis and HIV?

HIV can enter or leave the body more easily through a syphilis sore. People with syphilis are 2-5 times more likely to get HIV (if exposed) than people without syphilis.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

If you have syphilis, don't panic. Syphilis can be treated (and cured!) with the right medicine (antibiotics). All of your sex partners should be evaluated, tested, and treated. You should avoid having sex until your sex partner(s) have been treated. If you have sex and your partner didn't get treated, you can get it again. Getting syphilis or chlamydia more than once can put women at risk for more serious medical problems, including not being able to get pregnant later on.

How can syphilis be prevented?

You can avoid getting syphilis and STDs in a couple of different ways. First, if you don't have sex, you can't get infected.

But if you do have sex, you can reduce your risk of an STD by having one partner who is STD-free. Know your partner. Talk to your partner about condoms and preventing STDs/HIV and getting pregnant.

Get yourself tested for STDs if you are at risk. Anyone in Illinois who is 12 or older can get tested without their parents' consent.