



FACT SHEET

SYPHILIS

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. It has often been called “the great imitator” because so many of the signs and symptoms are indistinguishable from those of other diseases.

How do you get syphilis?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct skin to skin contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals (private areas), vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth. Pregnant women with syphilis can pass it to the babies they are carrying. Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.

What are the signs and symptoms of Syphilis?

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, yet remain at risk for late complications if they are not treated. Although transmission appears to occur from persons with sores who are in the primary or secondary stage, many of these sores are unrecognized. Thus, most transmission is from persons who are unaware of their infection. Syphilis occurs in stages. These stages are as follows:

Primary Stage -The primary stage of syphilis is the most infectious. There is a painless sore that when in comes in contact with another person it can give them syphilis. The sore will go away without treatment in a few weeks.

Secondary Stage -Usually there is a rash that appears on the palms of the hands or the bottoms of the feet. It does not itch and will go away without treatment in a few weeks.

Late Stage -This is the hidden stage of syphilis. Without treatment, the infected person will continue to have syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms; infection remains in the body. The infected person can go on to develop heart disease, liver disease, difficulty with muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and memory loss. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

How does syphilis affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

The syphilis bacteria can infect the baby of a woman during her pregnancy. Depending on how long a pregnant woman has been infected, she may have a high risk of having a stillbirth (a baby born dead) or of giving birth to a baby who dies shortly after birth. An infected baby may be born without signs or symptoms of disease. However, if not treated immediately, the baby may develop serious problems within a few weeks. Untreated babies may become developmentally delayed, blind, and deaf, have seizures, or die.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

A special microscope procedure can determine from the fluid of the sore if the syphilis bacteria is present.

A blood test is another way to determine whether someone has syphilis. The blood test is accurate, safe, and inexpensive blood test. Because untreated syphilis in a pregnant woman can infect and possibly kill her developing baby, every pregnant woman should have a blood test for syphilis.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages. A single injection of penicillin, an antibiotic, will cure a person who has had syphilis for less than a year. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis. However, if a woman is pregnant and is allergic to penicillin, she must see her doctor so they can treat the allergy, because she **MUST** be treated with penicillin so her baby is not infected. There are no home remedies or over-the-counter drugs that will cure syphilis. Treatment will kill the syphilis bacteria and prevent further damage, but it will not repair damage that has already accrued.

Will syphilis recur?

Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again. Following successful treatment, people can still be re-infected. Talking with a healthcare provider will help to determine the need to be re-tested for syphilis after treatment has been received.

How can syphilis be prevented?

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to not have syphilis.

Avoiding alcohol and drug use may also help prevent transmission of syphilis because these activities may lead to risky sexual behavior.

Transmission of a STD, including syphilis cannot be prevented by washing the genitals, urinating, and or douching after sex. Any unusual discharge, sore, or rash, particularly in the groin area, should be a signal to refrain from having sex and to see a doctor immediately.