

# What you need to know about syphilis

- Syphilis, once all but wiped out in the United States, is back, especially among men who have sex with men.
- A person can get syphilis from oral, anal, or vaginal sex.
- A person can have syphilis and not know it.
- Having syphilis increases your chance of catching, or spreading, HIV.
- Syphilis is completely curable.
- Untreated syphilis can be fatal.
- Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again.
- It's recommended that men who have sex with men get tested regularly.

## For more information:

[www.StopSyphMN.com](http://www.StopSyphMN.com)  
[www.health.state.mn.us/sep](http://www.health.state.mn.us/sep)  
[www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm)  
[www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/default.htm)



How to get tested for syphilis and other STDs:

- Visit your family doctor;
- In the Twin Cities go to:

**Red Door Services of the  
Hennepin County Public Health Clinic  
(formerly the Red Door Clinic)**  
**612-543-5555**  
**525 Portland Avenue S., Minneapolis MN 55415**  
<http://www.reddoorclinic.org>

**Clinic 555 Sexual Health Services  
St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health**  
**651-266-1255**  
**555 Cedar Street, St. Paul MN 55101**  
<http://www.clinic555.org>

- Or call **Minnesota Family Planning & STD Hotline** at 800-78FACTS (800-783-2287) voice/TTY, 651-645-9360 (metro) for locations in your area.  
<http://www.sexualhealthmn.org>



Minnesota Department of Health  
Freeman Office Building  
P.O. Box 64975, St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-5414 (TTY: 651-201-5797)  
If you require this document in another format, such as large print, braille, or cassette tape, call 651-201-5414  
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# Syphilis

**What you  
should know...**



**...What you can do.**



Minnesota Department of Health, IDEPC Division,  
STD and HIV Section, Syphilis Elimination Project

# What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a bacteria. A simple blood test can determine if a person is infected.

# How do I get it?

- Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore.
- Transmission occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- Pregnant women with the disease can pass it to the babies they are carrying.
- Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, swimming pools, hot tubs, bath tubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.

# Is it curable?

Syphilis is easily curable at all stages. However, while treatment will prevent further damage, it will not repair damage already caused by late stage syphilis.



# What are the symptoms?

Syphilis is called “the great imitator” because so many signs and symptoms are similar to other diseases. There are several stages of infection:

## Primary Stage

A sore (called a chancre) appears from 10 to 90 days after infection and lasts 1 to 5 weeks.

- The chancre:
  - appears on the genitals, vagina, anus, in the rectum or on the lips and in the mouth, wherever syphilis entered the body;
  - is painless; and
  - depending on location, may go unnoticed.
- The chancre heals with or without treatment.

## Secondary Stage

Without treatment, the infection progresses to the secondary stage. Symptoms may include:

- Rash
    - Can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed.
    - Rough, red, or reddish brown spots on the palms of the hands, the bottoms of the feet, on the torso, and/or other parts of the body.
    - Sometimes rashes are so faint that they go unnoticed.
  - Fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, mucous membrane lesions, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue.
- The symptoms will resolve with or without treatment.

## Latent

Without treatment, the infection progresses to the latent and late stages of disease.

- Latent syphilis means a person continues to be infected, but has no symptoms. Generally a person is no longer contagious sexually.
- Neurosyphilis may occur if the infection affects the central nervous system.
- Late stage syphilis may take many years to develop. Damage may occur to the internal organs, including the eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

# What about HIV?

- Syphilis greatly increases the chance of either getting or spreading HIV.
- People who are HIV+ may develop neurosyphilis faster than those who are negative.

# What can I do?

- The surest way to avoid syphilis is to abstain from sexual intercourse or be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.
- Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis, but only when the infected area or site of potential exposure is protected.
- Get tested regularly. The CDC recommends that men who have sex with men get tested annually or up to every three months for those with multiple and/or anonymous partners.

Sources: CDC fact sheet: Syphilis and MSM—[www.cdc.gov/std/healthcomm/fact\\_sheets.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/healthcomm/fact_sheets.htm)  
MDH Syphilis Facts—[www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/syphilis/syphilis.pdf](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/syphilis/syphilis.pdf)

