

# Syphilis

(caused by *Treponema pallidum*, a bacteria)

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

1st stage (primary syphilis)

- Symptoms begin 1-12 weeks after exposure
- A **painless**, open sore(s) on the mouth, genitals or anus
- Sore(s) can be “hidden” in the vagina or rectum
- Sore(s) last 1-5 weeks
- Sore(s) goes away, but syphilis is still in the blood

2nd stage (secondary syphilis)

- Symptoms show up 6 weeks to 6 months after sore appears
- A rash anywhere on the body
- Flu-like symptoms
- Whitish-grey patches on mouth/lips, wart-like lesions around genitals, and/or hair loss can occur but are less common

Latent stage

- No sores or rashes, but syphilis is still in the blood and can affect the heart, brain and other organs over time (tertiary syphilis)

## TRANSMISSION

Syphilis is spread by:

- Vaginal sex
- Oral sex
- Anal sex
- Infected mother to newborn

## COMPLICATIONS

If left untreated, syphilis can:

- Spread to sex partners
- Cause heart disease
- Cause blindness
- Cause brain damage
- Make it easier to transmit or acquire HIV during sex

During pregnancy, syphilis may cause:

- Stillbirths in pregnant women
- Congenital birth defects
- Severe damage to bones, brain, lungs, liver and other organs in infected infants

## PREVENTION

- Avoiding vaginal, oral or anal sex is the best way to prevent STDs.
- Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of syphilis only when the infected areas are covered or protected by the condom.
- Always use latex condoms during vaginal and anal sex.
- Use a latex condom for oral sex on a penis.
- Use a latex barrier (dental dam or condom cut in half) for oral sex on a vagina or anus.
- Limit the number of sex partners.
- Notify sex partners immediately if infected.
- Make sure partners are tested and treated.

## TESTING AND TREATMENT

- Get a test from a medical provider if infection is suspected.
- Syphilis can be cured using medication prescribed by medical provider.
- Partners should be treated at same time.

NOTE: A person can be re-infected after treatment.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Minnesota Department of Health  
 STD and HIV Section  
 (651) 201-5414; (651) 201-5797 TTY  
[www.health.state.mn.us/std](http://www.health.state.mn.us/std)

Minnesota Family Planning and STD Hotline  
 1-800-783-2287 Voice/TTY; (651) 645-9360 (Metro)  
[www.sexualhealthmn.org](http://www.sexualhealthmn.org)

American Social Health Association (ASHA)  
[www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org)

CDC National STD and AIDS Hotlines  
 1-800-CDC-INFO; 1-888-232-6348 TTY  
[www.cdc.gov/std](http://www.cdc.gov/std)

