

Syphilis and Women

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Syphilis can cause long term complications if not treated early and correctly. Syphilis is divided into stages, primary, secondary and latent and late.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is spread by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Syphilis can also be passed from an infected woman to her unborn baby. Sores can be found on the penis, vagina, anus, rectum, lips, or in the mouth.

What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

Syphilis symptoms in adults are divided into stages.

Primary Stage

- Symptoms begin between 10 to 90 days, an average of 21 days, after exposure.
- Painless, open sore(s) on the mouth, genitals, or anus. The sore(s) occurs at the location where syphilis entered the body.
- The sore(s) can be painless, making them difficult to find in the vagina or rectum. They usually last 3 to 6 weeks with or without treatment.
- Correct treatment is required or the syphilis remains in the body. Treatment will prevent infection from moving to the second stage.

Secondary Stage

- This stage typically starts with a rash on one or more areas of the body. It can look like rough, red, or reddish brown spots on the palms of the hands and/or the bottoms of the feet. The rash may be so faint that it will go unnoticed.
- Other symptoms can include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, wart like lesions, condyloma lata, may develop in warm moist areas, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue or feeling very tired.
- The symptoms will go away with or without treatment. Without the correct treatment, syphilis remains in the body and the infection will move to the latent and possibly late stages of syphilis.

Latent and Late Stages

- In latency symptoms have gone away, but the syphilis bacteria is still in the body if the correct treatment is not received.
- Symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis or not being able to move certain parts of the body, numbness, blindness, hearing loss and dementia.
- Late stages of syphilis can result in death due to the damage syphilis causes to internal organs.

How will my doctor know if I have syphilis?

Most of the time your doctor can use a blood test to determine if you have syphilis. Some doctors do a lumbar puncture test for syphilis that may have progressed into the brain or spinal column.

What are the complications of syphilis?

If not treated early and correctly, syphilis can:

- Be spread to sex partners.
- Cause difficulty coordinating your muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, blindness, and dementia (a steady loss of mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily living including hearing and memory loss).
- Cause heart disease and damage internal organs.
- Cause death.

What if I am pregnant?

Untreated syphilis during pregnancy can give your baby the infection and cause:

- Premature birth (your baby being born too early) or stillborn birth (a baby being born dead).
- Health problems like cataracts, deafness, seizures, or death.
- Severe damage to bones, brain, lungs, liver, and other organs.

How do I prevent getting syphilis?

- The only way to avoid getting syphilis is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- If you are sexually active you can reduce your chances of getting syphilis by:
 - Being in a long term committed relationship with only one partner who has been tested and has negative STD test results.
 - Using latex condoms the right way every time you have sex.
- Washing your genitals, urinating, or douching after sex will not protect you.
- Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Once you have been successfully treated, you can be re-infected.

Get tested and treated

- Get tested from a medical provider if you think you are infected.
- If you are infected, get treatment from your medical provider and follow instructions for treatment; syphilis can be cured.
- Your partner(s) should be tested and treated at the same time.

Minnesota Department of Health
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 651-201-5414
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 651-201-5414*