

SYPHILIS FACT SHEET

Reviewed By Medical Director: Aditya Chandraesekhar, MD, MPH, FACP | Updated On: 02/14/2023

WHAT IS SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) made up of four total stages (with different signs and symptoms) that can cause serious health problems if left untreated.

HOW DOES IT SPREAD?

You can get syphilis by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has syphilis sore. Additionally, a pregnant person with untreated syphilis can transfer the infection to their baby during pregnancy.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

There are four stages of syphilis (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary) and each stage will have different signs and symptoms:

- **Primary Stage:** You may notice a single or multiple sores (the location of the sores is where syphilis has entered the body. The sores are usually round, firm, and painless and can last between 3–6 weeks regardless of treatment. If you receive treatment during this stage, you will not move into the secondary stage.
- **Secondary Stage:** In the secondary stage, you may notice skin rashes and/or sores in the infected site. The skin rash can start on one or more parts of the body (including the palm of your hands or at the bottom of your feet), and can show up whilst your primary sore is healing or after the sore has already healed with the appearance of:
 - Rough; and
 - Red or reddish brown
 - Usually, the rash won't itch and can be faint enough to not be noticed – additional symptoms can be:
 - fever;
 - swollen lymph glands;
 - sore throat;
 - patchy hair loss;
 - headaches;
 - weight loss;
 - muscle aches; and
 - Fatigue
 - If you receive treatment during this stage, you will not move into the latent stage.
- **Latent Stage:** The latent stage of syphilis is a stage where there are no visible signs or symptoms. Left untreated, you can continue to have an active syphilis infection for years.
- **Tertiary Stage:** While most people with untreated syphilis do not advance to this stage, it does happen and can impact multiple organ symptoms including the heart, the brain, and the nervous system. This stage can occur 10–30 years after your initial infection and can result in death.

COMPLICATIONS OF SYPHILIS

Regardless of what stage of syphilis you are in, without treatment, it can spread to the brain and nervous system (neurosyphilis), the eye (ocular syphilis) and the ear (otosyphilis).

- Signs and symptoms of neurosyphilis can include:
 - Muscle weakness and/or issues with muscle movement;
 - Severe headache;
 - Changes in your mental state (confusion, personality change) and/or dementia (problems with memory, thinking, and/or decision making)
- Signs and symptoms of ocular syphilis can include:
 - Eye pain and/or redness; and
 - Changes in vision or even blindness
- Signs and symptoms of otosyphilis can include:
 - Hearing loss;
 - Ringing, buzzing, roaring, or hissing in the ears; and
 - Dizziness or vertigo

WHO'S AT RISK?

Any sexually active individual can contract and spread syphilis through unprotected vaginal, anal, and/or oral sex with a partner. Having an open and honest conversation about your sexual and lifestyle practices with your health practitioner is always recommended for guidance specific to your sexual practices. Additional considerations for testing can include:

- You are positive for HIV;
- You are an individual with a penis that has sex with other individuals with penis'; and
- You are taking PrEP for HIV prevention;
- You or your partner have tested positive for another STI/STD
- All pregnant individuals should receive testing at their first prenatal visit.

I'M PREGNANT – WHAT NOW?

If you are pregnant and positive for syphilis, you can pass the infection to your child during pregnancy. Additionally, it can lead to a low birth weight, early delivery, or even a stillborn birth. At birth, a baby positive for syphilis may not have any indicators of the disease but if treatment is not received immediately, serious health conditions can occur including deafness, cataracts, seizures, and even death. Please talk to your healthcare provider about examination, testing, and treatment. All pregnant individuals should receive testing at their first prenatal visit. The sooner you receive treatment, the less likely there will be health complications for your baby.

TEST OPTIONS

Often, testing will be conducted using a blood test. Certain cases might warrant testing of the fluid of a suspected syphilis sore.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

The right antibiotic treatment can cure syphilis – it is important to complete the treatment plan your health practitioner provides entirely i.e. do not share your medication or take only a portion of the medication provided. Medication will stop the infection, however, it may not undo any permanent damage caused by the disease.

WHEN TO HAVE SEX AGAIN?

You should wait 7 full days after completing treatment to have sex again – if you've had syphilis and received treatment in the past, you can still contract syphilis again. You and your partner(s) should avoid having sex until treatment is completed and symptoms have fully resolved to prevent reinfection. 3 months after treatment, you and your partner(s) should be retested regardless of a successful treatment.