

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is an infection spread through direct contact with a person who has the disease, almost always during sexual contact. It is one of the most dangerous sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). A pregnant woman who is infected can also spread syphilis to her baby either before or during birth.

Who gets syphilis?

Any person who has sex with a person infected with syphilis can get the disease.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

The first sign of syphilis is usually a sore, called chancre, which is painless and appears on or near the genitals, though it can show up somewhere else, such as the mouth or anus. It may be accompanied by swollen glands, which develop within a week after the appearance of the initial sore. When the sore is present, a person is said to have the **primary** stage of syphilis. The sore may disappear by itself within 1 to 5 weeks, even without treatment, but the disease stays in the body.

The **secondary** stage of syphilis begins approximately 7 weeks after the sore first appears. The most common symptom during this stage is a rash which may appear on any part of the body: trunk, arms, legs, palms, soles, etc. Other symptoms may also occur which include tiredness, fever, sore throat, headaches, hoarseness, loss of appetite, and swollen glands. These signs and symptoms last 2 to 6 weeks, and will disappear even if no treatment is received.

After the second stage, **latent** syphilis begins during which there are no apparent signs or symptoms of disease. This stage can occur anytime up until the disease is cured or the serious symptoms of late syphilis begin.

Late syphilis occurs when the disease goes untreated and may involve illness in the skin, bones, central nervous system and heart and can cause disability or death.

With proper treatment during the primary stage, the sores will go away and the later stages of the disease will be prevented.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear from 10 to 90 days after a person becomes infected, but usually within 3 to 4 weeks. Symptoms are often not noticed or are thought to be minor abrasions or heat rash and medical care is not sought right away.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

In early syphilis, a sample of fluid can be taken from the sore (chancre) and checked for the organism. Later in the disease, blood testing is required.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is spread mainly through sexual contact in which there is contact to open sores or breaks in the skin.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics prescribed by a physician, usually penicillin, doxycycline, or tetracycline. The amount of treatment required depends on the stage of syphilis the patient is experiencing. Follow-up examination is very important to make sure the treatment has cured the disease.

How can syphilis be prevented?

Not having sex is the only sure way to avoid getting syphilis or any other STD. Otherwise, limiting the number of one's sexual partners reduces the chance of being exposed. Using condoms correctly with all partners will decrease the possibility of becoming infected. If you think you are infected, avoid any sexual contact until you have visited a doctor, hospital or STD clinic. If you are infected, notify your sex partners immediately so they can be tested and treated.

How can I get more information about syphilis?

- If you have concerns about syphilis, call your healthcare provider.
- If you have questions about any sexually transmitted disease, including syphilis, please call the Virginia Disease Prevention Hotline at 1-800-533-4148.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/default.htm>