

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that can cause heart damage, brain damage, and even death if it is not treated. Syphilis is divided into stages: primary, secondary, early non-primary non-secondary, and unknown duration or late syphilis. There are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage. Syphilis is caused by bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*.

### How is syphilis spread?

You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore (called a chancre) during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Sores can be found on or around the penis, vagina, anus, inside the rectum, on the lips, or in the mouth. Pregnant women can pass the infection to their unborn babies.

### What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

Syphilis is characterized by progressive stages (primary, secondary, early non-primary non-secondary, and unknown duration or late), with different signs and symptoms associated with each stage.

- **Primary syphilis:** The typical sign of primary syphilis is a sore (chancre) at the site of infection, usually around the genitals, around the anus, in the rectum, or in the mouth. These sores are usually firm, round, and painless. It may look like an ulcer with a raised border, like a blister or a pimple. The chancre may disappear in three to six

weeks, but if left untreated, the person is still contagious and still has syphilis.

- **Secondary syphilis:** A person with secondary syphilis may have a painless rash on the body, especially the palms of the hands or soles of the feet. This rash can appear when the primary chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. A person may also have swollen lymph nodes, headache, and fever. Syphilis can also be spread at this stage.
- **Early non-primary non-secondary syphilis:** A person in this stage will not have signs of primary or secondary syphilis.
- **Unknown duration or late syphilis:** A person in this stage will not have signs of primary or secondary syphilis. Severe medical problems that can affect the heart, brain, and other organs of the body can develop in this stage.

Others symptoms such as severe headaches, dementia, changes in vision, and even blindness can occur at any stage of syphilis.

### Who is most at risk?

Any sexually active person can get syphilis through unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex. You can also get syphilis through physical contact with a sore (chancre).

- All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis or other STDs.

- You should get tested regularly for syphilis if you are sexually active and
  - are a man who has sex with men;
  - are living with HIV;
  - have partners who have tested positive for syphilis.

### How is syphilis diagnosed?

A blood test is most often used to test for syphilis. Sometimes fluid from a syphilis sore or spinal fluid may be tested.

### What type of health problems are caused by syphilis?

**Neurosyphilis:** Untreated syphilis can cause central nervous system damage, stroke-like symptoms, and may occur at any stage.

**Ocular syphilis:** The bacteria that cause syphilis, *T. pallidum*, can infect any part of the eye causing a change in vision and can develop at any stage of syphilis.

### I'm pregnant. How does syphilis affect my baby?

A pregnant woman with syphilis can give the infection to her unborn baby. If left untreated, syphilis may lead to infant disorders such as damage to the nervous system, deafness, and bone deformities. Having syphilis while pregnant may lead to a low birth weight baby, spontaneous abortion, or stillborn baby. To protect your baby, **you should get tested for syphilis at least once**

**during pregnancy and receive immediate treatment if you test positive.**

### How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis can be treated with penicillin from your healthcare provider. However, treatment may not undo any damage that the infection has already done. Even after successful treatment, you can get syphilis again from an infected sex partner that has not been treated.

### How can syphilis be prevented?

If you are sexually active, you can do the following things to lower your chances of getting syphilis:

- Having sex with only one partner who has been tested for syphilis and does not have syphilis and who has sex only with you.
- Using latex condoms properly every time you have sex. See <https://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/male-condom-use.html> for the right way to use condoms. Condoms prevent transmission of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. Sometimes sores are in areas not covered by a condom, and if you have contact with these sores, you can still get syphilis.

### Where can I get more information?

- [Center for Disease Control](#)
- [Utah Department of Health](#) (801) 538-6191
- [Free & Low-Cost Testing in Utah](#)

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