



Syphilis

Syphilis (**si-fuh-luhs**) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the germ *Treponema pallidum*. There are 3 stages of syphilis. The stage you have depends on your symptoms. The stages progress over time if you do not get treated. This means the longer that you have syphilis and are not treated, the worse the symptoms may get. If syphilis is not treated by the final (tertiary) stage, it could lead to death.

Anyone that is sexually active is at risk of getting syphilis. It is spread through direct contact with a sore, or chancre (**shang-kr**), through vaginal, oral, or anal sex. It can also be spread from an infected parent to their baby through vaginal delivery. You **cannot** get syphilis through contact with:

- Toilet seats
- Doorknobs
- Hot tubs
- Bathtubs
- Swimming pools
- Shared clothing or eating utensils

Risk Factors

Having vaginal, oral, or anal sex puts you at risk for getting syphilis. The risk is higher if you:

- Have been diagnosed with another STI in the past, like gonorrhea or chlamydia.
- Are not using protection, like a condom, during sex.
- Are a male or trans-female having unprotected sex with male or trans-female partners.

Signs and Symptoms

Syphilis has 3 stages that are based on signs and symptoms. It is diagnosed with a blood test.

Stage 1: Primary

- One or more red chancres appear. They're usually round, firm, and painless. They can appear on, in, or around the: penis, vagina, anus, rectum, lips, or inside the mouth.
- Even without treatment, the sores will heal and go away after 3 to 6 weeks. You still need to be treated for syphilis to keep it from moving to the second stage.

Stage 2: Secondary

- Symptoms usually begin weeks to months after the first chancre sore appears. Many people miss the signs of this stage.
- Common symptoms:
 - Fever
 - Fatigue
 - Headache
 - Skin rash
 - Muscle aches
 - Weight loss
 - Loss of appetite
 - Patchy hair loss
 - Large lymph nodes

Stage 3: Late (tertiary)

- If primary or secondary syphilis is not treated, it can spread. This can cause damage to the heart, brain, bones, and skin. It could lead to death.
- Common symptoms are problems with:
 - Vision
 - Walking
 - Memory loss
 - Balance
 - Bladder control
 - Mental function

Treatment

If syphilis is not treated, it can cause severe health problems. It can also increase your risk for getting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

- Treatment for early infections is usually 1 antibiotic shot. You may need more than 1 shot of antibiotics depending on how long you've had the infection.
- Blood tests need to be done 3, 6, and 12 months after treatment is finished. Keep all of your follow-up appointments to make sure the infection is gone. You'll probably have a few of these visits.
- You and your partner(s) must be treated. You can be treated at:
 - Nationwide Children's Hospital – call central scheduling at (614) 722-6200
 - The Columbus Health Department located at 240 Parsons Avenue, Columbus, OH 43215. You can also call (614) 645-7417.
 - **If you or your partner(s) live outside of Columbus, call your local health department.**

Preventing Future Infection

Not having sex (abstinence) is the best way to avoid STIs. If you do have sex, these things might help prevent the spread of STIs:

- Limit your number of sexual partners. Know your partner(s) and their sexual history.
- **Use a new condom** every time you have sex, the whole time you have sex.
- Have an extra condom with you in case the one you are using breaks.
- Get tested for other STIs and HIV. Having syphilis can increase your risk of these other infections.

Other Questions

- For any questions, call Nationwide Children's Adolescent Medicine clinic at (614) 722-2450 or Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology at (614) 722-2250.
- You can also call the National STI Hotline at 1 (800) 227-8922, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.
- Go online to find out more at: <http://www.ashastd.org/sitemap.cfm>