Syphilis – Fact Sheet



Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that can have very serious complications when left untreated, but it is simple to cure with the right treatment.

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause serious health problems if it is not treated. Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). There are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage.

How is syphilis spread?

You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. You can find sores on or around the penis, vagina, or anus. You can also find them in the rectum, on the lips, or in the mouth. Syphilis can spread from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

What does syphilis look like?

Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary), with different signs and symptoms associated with each stage. A person with **primary syphilis** generally has a sore or sores at the original site of infection. These sores usually occur on or around the genitals, around the anus or in the rectum, or in or around the mouth. These sores are usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless. Symptoms of **secondary syphilis** include skin rash, swollen lymph nodes, and fever. The signs and symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis can be mild, and they might not be noticed. During the **latent stage**, there are no signs or symptoms. **Tertiary syphilis** is associated with severe medical problems. A doctor can usually diagnose tertiary syphilis with the help of multiple tests. It can affect the heart, brain, and other organs of the body.

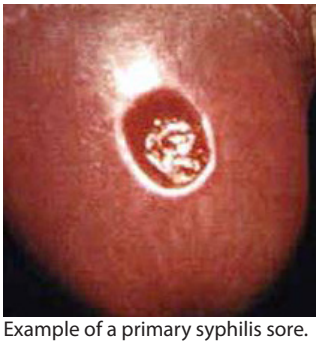
How can I reduce my risk of getting syphilis?

The only way to avoid STDs is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

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

- Being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested for syphilis and does not have syphilis;

- Using latex condoms, the right way, every time you have sex. Condoms prevent transmission of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. Sometimes sores occur in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.


Example of a primary syphilis sore.

Am I at risk for syphilis?

Any sexually active person can get syphilis through unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Have an honest and open talk with your health care provider and ask whether you should be tested for syphilis or other STDs. All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis at their first prenatal visit. In addition, 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, or have partner(s) who have tested positive for syphilis.

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

If you are pregnant and have syphilis, you can give the infection to your unborn baby. Having syphilis can lead to a low birth weight baby. It can also make it more likely you will deliver your baby too early or stillborn (a baby born dead). To protect your baby, **you should be tested for syphilis at least once during your pregnancy. Receive immediate treatment if you test positive**.

An infected baby may be born without signs or symptoms of disease. However, if not treated immediately, the baby may develop serious problems within a few weeks. Untreated babies can have health problems such as cataracts, deafness, or seizures, and can die.

What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?


Secondary rash from syphilis on palms of hands.

Symptoms of syphilis in adults vary by stage:

Primary Stage

During the first (primary) stage of syphilis, you may notice a single sore or multiple sores. The sore is the location where syphilis entered your body. Sores are usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless. Because the sore is painless, it can easily go unnoticed. The sore usually lasts 3 to 6 weeks and heals regardless of whether or not you receive treatment. Even after the sore goes away, you must still receive treatment. This will stop your infection from moving to the secondary stage.

Secondary Stage

During the secondary stage, you may have skin rashes and/or mucous membrane lesions. Mucous membrane lesions are sores in your mouth, vagina, or anus. This stage usually starts with a rash on one or more areas of your body. The rash can show up when your primary sore is healing or several weeks after the sore has healed. The rash can look like rough, red, or reddish brown spots on the palms of your hands and/or the bottoms of your feet. The rash usually won't itch and it is sometimes so faint that you won't notice it. Other symptoms you may have can include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue (feeling very tired). The


Secondary rash from syphilis on torso.

symptoms from this stage will go away whether or not you receive treatment. Without the right treatment, your infection will move to the latent and possibly tertiary stages of syphilis.

Latent Stage

The latent stage of syphilis is a period of time when there are no visible signs or symptoms of syphilis. If you do not receive treatment, you can continue to have syphilis in your body for years without any signs or symptoms.

Tertiary Stage

Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop tertiary syphilis. However, when it does happen it can affect many different organ systems, including the heart and blood vessels, and the brain and nervous system. Tertiary syphilis is very serious and would occur 10–30 years after your infection began. In tertiary syphilis, the disease damages your internal organs and can result in death.

Neurosyphilis and Ocular Syphilis

Without treatment, syphilis can spread to the brain and nervous system (neurosyphilis) or to the eye (ocular syphilis). This can happen during any of the stages described above.

Symptoms of neurosyphilis include:

- severe headache;
- difficulty coordinating muscle movements;
- paralysis (not able to move certain parts of your body);
- numbness; and

Symptoms of ocular syphilis include changes in your vision and even blindness.

How will I or my doctor know if I have syphilis?

Most of the time, a blood test can be used to test for syphilis. Some health care providers will diagnose syphilis by testing fluid from a syphilis sore.

Can syphilis be cured?

Yes, syphilis can be cured with the right antibiotics from your health care provider. However, treatment might not undo any damage that the infection has already done.

I've been treated. Can I get syphilis again?

Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Even after you've been successfully treated, you can still be re-infected. Only laboratory tests can confirm whether you have syphilis. Follow-up testing by your health care provider is recommended to make sure that your treatment was successful.

It may not be obvious that a sex partner has syphilis because syphilis sores can be hidden in the vagina, anus, under the foreskin of the penis, or in the mouth. Unless you know that your sex partner(s) has been tested and treated, you may be at risk of getting syphilis again from an infected sex partner.

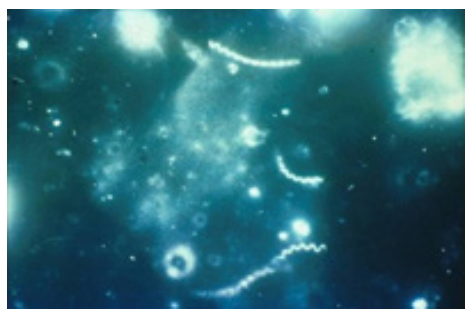
Where can I get more information?

24hr Hotline +(852) 6511 8000

Monday to Friday
by appointment 10:00am - 06:00pm
Saturday to Sunday
By appointment 10:00am – 01:00pm

CENTRAL:
Room 704, Manning House, 38 Queen's Road Central, Central

TSIM SHA TSUI:
Suite 1408, 14/F, World Commerce Centre, 11 Canton Road, Tsim Sha Tsui



Darkfield micrograph of Treponema pallidum.