



1. What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by bacteria. If it isn't treated, it can cause organ damage or death.

2. How do you get syphilis?

Syphilis is passed through direct skin-to-skin contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. These sores usually occur in the mouth, external genitals, vagina, anus, or rectum. Syphilis sores are not always obvious because they can be hidden and painless. Pregnant women with syphilis can also pass it to their unborn baby.

3. How do you know if you have syphilis?

Syphilis is disease of stages. Each stage has different symptoms which can come and go. Unless syphilis is treated and cured, it will stay in the body and can cause serious complications over time.

Primary Stage: Painless sores called chancres appear on, around, or inside the penis, vagina, mouth, or anus. Chancres appear ten days to three months after infection. *During the first stage, syphilis is spread by contact with these sores.*

Secondary Stage: A few weeks after the chancres go away, a rash may appear on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, on the trunk of the body, or in the genital or anal area. The rash **doesn't** itch. Other symptoms include mild fever, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes, or clumpy hair loss. Without treatment, these symptoms may come and go for one to two years. *During the secondary stage, syphilis is spread only through contact with rashes in the genital or anal area (not through rashes on other parts of the body).*

Latent Stage: After a year of infection, primary and secondary stage symptoms disappear and the person enters the latent stage. Without treatment, the disease will stay in the body for many years, and can cause serious organ damage and even death. *A person in the latent stage is no longer contagious.*

If syphilis is not treated, it can later cause damage to the eyes, joints, bones, heart, and brain— leading to blindness, seizures, dementia (loss of brain function) or death.

4. How do you get tested for syphilis?

Do not diagnose yourself at home. Go to a doctor or a health clinic to be tested. In both men and women, getting tested for syphilis involves a simple blood test.

5. How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis can be easily cured with antibiotics. Although treatment will cure the disease and stop future damage, it may not reverse or repair any damage that may have happened before treatment. People receiving syphilis treatment must avoid sexual contact with partners until the syphilis sores are completely healed. It is important to make sure any current sex partner(s) have completely finished treatment before having sex with them again.

6. How can syphilis be prevented?

- Latex, polyurethane, and female condoms offer some protection against syphilis but may not cover all infectious areas when having oral, vaginal, or anal sex.
- Limit the number of sex partners.
- Talk to your partner about STDs before having sex.
- Get tested for STDs at least once a year.
- Avoid sexual contact with someone who has syphilis until they have been treated.
- If you are pregnant or think you are pregnant, get early prenatal care to prevent passing any infections to your baby.

Sources

1. *Syphilis*. L.A. Department of Public Health. <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/std/syphilis.htm>
2. *Syphilis*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm>

For additional resources, please visit the L.A. County Department of Public Health website <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov>.