

## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# Syphilis

### **What is Syphilis?**

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a thin elongated bacterium *Treponema pallidum*.

### **How is Syphilis spread?**

Syphilis is spread from person to person by direct contact with syphilis sore. Sores can be found on the penis, vagina, anus, in the rectum, or on the lips and in the mouth.

- Syphilis is spread by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has Syphilis;
- A pregnant woman with Syphilis can give the infection to her baby during childbirth.

### **What are the symptoms of Syphilis?**

Syphilis has been called ‘the great imitator’ because it has so many possible symptoms, many of which look like symptoms from other diseases. Symptoms of syphilis in adults can be divided into stages:

#### **Primary Stage**

The primary stage of syphilis is usually marked by the appearance of a single sore called a chancre, but there may be multiple sores. The sore is the location where syphilis entered your body. The sore is usually firm, round, reddish, small, and painless. The chancre lasts 3 to 6 weeks, and it heals without treatment. However, if adequate treatment is not administered, the infection progresses to the secondary stage.

#### **Secondary Stage**

Skin rash and mucous membrane lesions characterize the secondary stage. This stage typically starts with the development of a rash on one or more areas of the body. The rash usually does not cause itching. Rashes associated with secondary syphilis can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. The characteristic rash of secondary syphilis may appear as rough, red, or reddish brown spots both on the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. However, rashes with a different appearance may occur on other parts of the body, sometimes resembling rashes caused by other diseases. Sometimes rashes associated with secondary syphilis are so faint that they are not noticed. In addition to rashes, symptoms of secondary syphilis may include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will resolve with or without treatment, but without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and late stages of disease.

#### **Latent and Late Stage**

The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when secondary symptoms disappear. Without treatment, the infected person will continue to have syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms;

infection remains in the body. In the late stages of syphilis, it may subsequently damage the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This internal damage may show up many years later. Signs and symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

### **How long after exposure to the bacteria do symptoms begin?**

During the Primary Stage, the time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptom can range from 10 to 90 days (average 21 days)..

### **How is Syphilis diagnosed?**

Soon after infection occurs, the body produces syphilis antibodies that can be detected by a simple blood test. Some health care providers will diagnose syphilis by testing fluid from a syphilis sore. Since untreated syphilis in a woman can infect or even kill her baby, every pregnant woman should be tested for syphilis.

### **How is Syphilis treated?**

Syphilis is treated with antibiotics from your health care provider. Syphilis can be treated with 1-3 injections of penicillin, depending on the stage. Other antibiotics are available for people who are allergic to penicillin. It is very important to complete the entire course of treatment and to have a follow-up exam to make sure that you are cured. There are no over the counter or home remedies to treat syphilis. Treatment will not undo any damage that the infection has already done.

### **I was treated for Syphilis. Can I get Syphilis again?**

Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again. If both you and your sex partner have syphilis, and only one of you gets treated, that partner can still get it again from the untreated partner. Syphilis sores are not always visible; just because someone looks like they don't have it doesn't mean you can't get it from them.

### **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 and has negative STD test results;
- Using latex condoms the right way every time you have sex.
- Have regular medical exams if you are sexually active. If you think you have a STD, get tested.
- Tell your partner if you are infected. Tell anyone you have had sex with that they need to be tested

### **What is the link between syphilis and HIV?**

Sores caused by syphilis make it easier for HIV to enter the body; likewise, someone with HIV will be less able to fight off a syphilis infection. Someone with syphilis who is exposed to HIV is between 2 and 5 times as likely to become infected with HIV as someone who does not have HIV.

**For more information on Syphilis, call (816) 325-7204**

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