



Syphilis

(SIF-ih-liss)

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by a bacterium (germ).

How can a person get Syphilis?

Syphilis is spread from person to person through direct skin to skin contact with a syphilis sore. Syphilis sores may be present on the vagina, penis, anus, mouth, lips or in the rectum. An infection occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Syphilis can be passed even if the syphilis sore is not seen or felt, so people can pass syphilis even if they don't know they are infected. Syphilis can also be passed from a pregnant mother to the baby during birth.

You can increase your risk of infection by:

- Having sex without using a latex or polyurethane condom
- Having multiple sex partners
- Having a different STI or HIV
- Having sex while high on drugs or under the influence of alcohol can increase your risk as this makes it less likely that condoms will be used correctly

Who can get Syphilis?

Anyone who is sexually active can get Syphilis. Having unprotected sex (sex without a condom) increases the chance of getting Syphilis. While men and women are at risk for the infection, more than half of the reported cases in the U.S. are in men who have sex with men (MSM).

What are the symptoms of Syphilis?

Many people do not have symptoms. Symptoms may start 10 to 90 days after infection, but the average is 21 days. Some people may not develop symptoms for years.

For those who do have symptoms, the most common ones are:

- Sores or bumps on your mouth, anus, vagina, penis, or testicles (balls)
- A rash on your whole body, including your hands and feet
- Hair loss
- A fever
- Swollen glands

The infection can last for years if it is not treated

How long can an infected person spread Syphilis?

A person with a sore or bump can spread the syphilis from the time they are infected until they are treated. Because these sores may not be visible, people can pass the infection to others without knowing it. Once treated, you can pass the germ until the sores are completely healed. The longer an infected person is left untreated, the higher the risk of serious long term problems.

How can I find out if I have Syphilis?

The only way to know for sure if you have syphilis is to **get tested**. A healthcare provider usually tests for syphilis from a blood sample. Because untreated syphilis can cause problems for a fetus, all pregnant women should be tested for syphilis. People whose sexual activities place them at risk for syphilis should be tested regularly so they can be treated quickly if infected.

Where can I get tested?

Most health care providers offer testing for Chlamydia and other STIs. To find a health care center in a neighborhood near you, call the Mayor's Health Line at **617-534-5050 and Toll-Free: 1-800-847-0710** or visit <http://www.hivtest.org/STDTesting.aspx> and enter your zip code.

Can Syphilis be treated?

Yes, syphilis is usually treated with antibiotic shots.

Should my partner get treated?

Yes. You can still get Syphilis again even after being treated so it is important to have all recent or regular sex partners treated at the same time so you don't get infected again.

What happens if Syphilis is not treated?

If left untreated, syphilis can cause serious health problems. Long term infection without treatment can damage internal organs. In addition, persons with syphilis are up to 5 times more likely to acquire HIV if exposed.

Can Syphilis affect a pregnant woman and her fetus?

Yes. Syphilis can cause serious problems in a on a pregnant woman and her fetus.

How can you protect yourself from getting PID?

The only 100% effective way to prevent PID is to not have sex.

If you do have sex, you can limit your risk by taking the following steps:

- Always use a latex or polyurethane condom or barrier (dental dam) when having anal, vaginal and/or oral sex
 - Condoms made from "natural" materials may protect against pregnancy but NOT STIs
- Reduce your number of partners if you choose to have sex
- Talk with your partner about their STI status and getting tested
- Talk with your health care provider about sex safety and getting tested
- Understand that having sex while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol can increase the likelihood of unprotected sex
- Contact your health care provider if you experience any symptoms



**For more information contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Infectious Disease Bureau
617-534-5611 or www.bphc.org**