



Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. The infection has 4 stages: primary, secondary, early latent and tertiary.

How is it spread?

Syphilis can be spread by having sex or coming into close skin to skin contact with someone who is infected with syphilis. A baby can also get syphilis from their mother during pregnancy or at birth.

What are the symptoms?

Each stage of syphilis has a different set of symptoms. The symptoms can vary or be so mild that you may not know they have a syphilis infection.

To find out if you have syphilis, you must be examined by a health care provider. You will be sent for lab tests, where your blood and the sore(s) will be tested.

Primary stage

During the primary stage, a painless sore can develop anywhere on your body that came into contact with an infected person. The sore usually appears about 3 weeks after first contact, but can appear anywhere between 3 and 90 days after being infected. Sometimes, the sore will not be noticeable on your body. The sore will go away on its own within 1 month, however the disease will continue to spread.

Secondary stage

The secondary stage usually starts about 2 to 12 weeks after being infected, but can start anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months after being infected. During this stage a rash may develop. The rash can appear anywhere on your body, but it is most often found on your belly, genitals,

palms of your hands, and soles of your feet. You may not notice the rash, but you can still spread the disease to other people.

Latent stage

After the rash goes away, and if you do not receive treatment, the disease will progress to the latent or hidden stage of syphilis. You may not have any symptoms for a period of time. The latent period can last from 3 to 30 years.

Tertiary stage

In the tertiary or late stage, untreated syphilis can cause severe complications that can lead to death.

What are the complications?

If syphilis is not treated, neurologic complications such as hearing or vision loss, or dizziness can develop during and after the secondary stage. After several years, complications such as damage to your brain, heart and other organs in your body can occur and can lead to death. Syphilis contracted by an unborn child can result in pre-term birth, abnormalities in the baby, or a stillbirth.

What is the treatment?

During any stage, syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotic treatment cannot undo the damage caused by syphilis in the late or tertiary stage, but it can prevent further damage. After treatment, you must have blood tests to make sure the treatment worked.

Do not have sex until 2 weeks after you and your partner(s) have finished the treatment.

Will my birth control pills work if I am taking antibiotics?

Birth control pills may not work very well when you are taking some antibiotics. Keep taking

your birth control pills while taking any medication but also use a second form of birth control, such as a condom, until your next period after completing the antibiotics.

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

Practice safe sex by using a condom

When used as directed, male and female condoms help prevent the spread of many STIs, including HIV, during vaginal, anal and oral sex. Condoms are less effective at protecting against STIs transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, such as herpes simplex, genital warts (human papillomavirus or HPV), and syphilis.

Important things to remember when using condoms:

- Check the condom package for damage and to ensure the expiry date has not passed.
- Carefully open the package so that the condom does not tear.
- Keep condoms away from sharp objects such as rings, studs, or piercings.
- Store condoms at room temperature.
- A new condom should be used every time you have sex.
- Use only water-based lubricants with male latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly, lotion, or baby oil can weaken and destroy latex.
- Avoid using spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9). It irritates sexual tissue and may increase the chance of getting an STI.

Get vaccinated

Some STIs, such as hepatitis A, B and human papillomavirus (HPV) can be prevented with vaccines. Talk to your health care provider about how to get these vaccinations.

Know your sexual health status

If you have recently changed sexual partners, or have multiple sex partners, getting regularly tested for STIs will tell you if you have an infection. Finding and treating an STI, (including HIV) reduces the chances of passing the infection on to your partner.

The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.

Talk about prevention

Talk to your partner about STIs and how you would like to prevent them before having sex. If you are having trouble discussing safer sex with your partner, talk about it with your health care provider or a counselor.

For tips on how to talk to your partner, visit the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Smart Sex Resource at <http://smartsexresource.com/sex-talk/talk-about-it>.

Informing Partners

If you have a sexually transmitted infection and are sexually active, it is important to tell your sexual partners. This will enable them to make decisions about their health and getting tested.

For More Information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see HealthLinkBC File #08o [Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

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