

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Syphilis



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted disease (STD) that can cause long-term complications if not treated correctly. It has often been called “the great imitator” because so many signs and symptoms look like other diseases.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with sores, usually during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. The sores can also be present on the lips and in the mouth. Pregnant women can pass syphilis to their babies. Syphilis cannot be spread by toilet seats, door knobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bath tubs, shared clothing or eating.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of syphilis occur in four stages – *primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary (late)*.

Primary syphilis: a single sore, called a chancre, appears 2 to 6 weeks after infection.

Secondary syphilis: a skin rash with brown sores, about the size of a penny, on the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet. This rash appears from 3 to 6 weeks after the sore appears.

Latent syphilis: during this stage, the disease is no longer catching and symptoms are not present. People who are not treated will suffer from no further signs and symptoms of the disease.

Tertiary syphilis: one-third of people who have had secondary syphilis go on to develop the complications tertiary syphilis where there can be damage to the heart, eyes, brain, nervous system, bones, joints, or almost any other part of the body.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

A health care provider can diagnose syphilis with a simple blood test to see if the bacteria is present.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is usually treated with the antibiotic penicillin. Some people, however, do not respond to the normal doses of penicillin so it is important that people being treated for syphilis have periodic blood tests to check to see if the infection has been killed. Treatment in all stages will cure the disease but it cannot undo any damage that the infection has already caused.

Can syphilis cause other complications?

Yes. About 3% to 7% of people with untreated syphilis develop neurosyphilis, a sometime serious disorder of the nervous system. Some people with neurosyphilis never develop any symptoms; others may have a headache, a stiff neck, and a fever that result from swelling of the lining of the brain.

How can syphilis be prevented?

The best way to avoid spreading any STD, including syphilis, is to abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a long-term committed relationship with only one partner who has been tested and you know is uninfected.

Latex condoms, when used regularly and correctly, can reduce the risk of spreading or getting syphilis.

Any genital symptoms such as discharge or burning during urination or unusual sore or rash should be a signal to stop having sex and see a doctor immediately. If a person has been treated for syphilis (or any other STD), they should notify all recent sex partners so they can see a health care provider and be treated. This will reduce the risk that the sex partners will develop serious complications from syphilis and will also reduce the person's risk of becoming re-infected. The person and all of his or her sex partners must avoid sex until they have completed their treatment for syphilis.

Will syphilis come back?

Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again. It can come back if proper protections, such as using a male latex condom, are not used.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609) 265-5533
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at 1-800-624-2377 or on the NJDOH
- Website at <http://www.nj.gov/health/>