

Syphilis Fact Sheet

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a bacterium

Treponema pallidum is the bacterium that causes syphilis.

Syphilis is spread by sexual contact

The bacterium is found in sores that can occur anywhere on the skin or inside the mouth or genitals of infected persons. It passes to the next person when two people have sex.

Signs and symptoms to look for:

- One or many weeping sores on the genitals, rectum, or mouth. The sores are usually painless. Syphilis sores can look like many other things. Although the sores will go away, a person is still infected with syphilis and must be treated.
- Rashes anywhere on the body. The rash can be flat, scaly, bumpy, round, or crater-like. Spots or scaling on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet are common. Large moist patches can occur in the mouth and in the groin areas. Although the rashes will go away, a person is still infected with syphilis and must be treated.
- Headaches
- Sore throat
- Swollen glands
- Hair falling out in patches

The first symptoms start 10 days to 3 months (usually 3 weeks) after sexual contact with someone who has syphilis. Many people who have syphilis do not know it. The sores may be in a place on the body where they cannot be seen, or the sores may be mistaken for some other problem, like a pimple or cut. Late stages of syphilis can cause permanent damage to the heart, brain, skin, bone, and other organs.

Syphilis can also be spread from an infected mother to her unborn baby

Syphilis causes very severe infections in babies who catch it from their mothers. The bacterium can cross the placenta and infect an unborn baby. Babies who catch syphilis from their mothers can have severe complications including death, liver failure, pneumonia, bleeding, or damage to the brain, bones, teeth, skin & eye disease.

Syphilis can be treated with antibiotics

Syphilis must be diagnosed with a blood test. See a doctor if you think you may have been exposed to syphilis.

Syphilis is preventable

- Avoid infection by abstaining from sex, or by only having sex with one non-syphilitic person who only has sex with you
- Avoid unprotected sex—use condoms each and every time you have sex
- Know the signs and symptoms of syphilis

If you think you or your partners have syphilis or another STD, don't have sex until you and your partners see a doctor and complete treatment

If you have syphilis, tell your partners so they can be treated