



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease. It is known as the "great mimic," because its symptoms are like those of many other diseases. There are two types. Congenital form occurs in babies (age 0 to 2 weeks) born to mothers with syphilis. Contagious form is the type that affects persons of all ages and both sexes who get it by sexual contact. There may be no symptoms or very mild ones. A person may not know they are infected.

FREQUENT SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Primary stage (contagious; begins 9 to 90 days after exposure; usually at about 3 weeks):
 - A painless, red sore (chancre) on the genitals, mouth, or rectum. The sore usually affects the penis in males and vagina or cervix in females.
- Secondary stage (occurs if not treated; contagious; begins 2 to 8 weeks after the chancre appears):
 - Enlarged lymph glands in the neck, armpit, or groin.
 - Headache, sore throat, and feeling tired.
 - Rash on skin and mucous membranes of the penis, vagina, or mouth. The rash has small, red, scaly bumps.
 - Fever (sometimes).
- Latent stage or hidden stage (can be 2 to 30 years after second stage; may be contagious):
 - There are no signs or symptoms.
- Tertiary stage (rare; not contagious; may appear 2 to 30 years after other stages):
 - The infection can seriously damage the heart, brain, nervous system, eyes, skin, bones, and joints.

CAUSES

- A germ (bacteria) called *Treponema pallidum*.
- Contagious form is spread by sexual contact (vaginal, anal, or oral sex) with someone who has the sores or rash. Germs cannot be spread from toilet seats, towels, or other objects.
- Congenital form passes to a baby by infected mother.

RISK INCREASES WITH

Unsafe sex.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Latex male condoms used during sexual contact help stop the risk, but do not provide 100% protection.
- Avoid sexual contact with an infected person or a person whose health history you don't know.
- Obtain blood test for syphilis early in pregnancy. If infected, get treatment right away.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Curable with antibiotic treatment.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- After penicillin treatment, you may have a Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction. A fever, headache, muscle aches, and other symptoms may last for about 24 hours.
- Treatment in a few patients may need to be repeated.
- Syphilis sores makes it easier to get an HIV infection.
- Without treatment, the disease may progress to the next stage. A number of medical problems and death may occur with tertiary syphilis.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider will do a physical exam. Blood tests and microscope studies of material from a sore are usually done to confirm the diagnosis. Tests for other sexually transmitted diseases are often done.
- Syphilis is treated with drugs.
- Be sure that all your sexual partners obtain treatment. The public health department will help you if needed.
- After drug treatment, blood tests will be done at regular intervals to verify that you are no longer infectious.
- The tertiary stage of syphilis generally requires treatment in a hospital.
- To learn more: Sexually Transmitted Diseases Hotline (800) 227-8922 or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: www.cdc.gov.

MEDICATIONS

Penicillin will be given by injection for all stages. If someone is allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics can be equally effective.

ACTIVITY

Avoid sexual intercourse until cured.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of syphilis.
- The following occur during or after treatment: fever, skin rash, sore throat, or swelling in any joint, such as the ankle or knee.
- You have had sexual contact with someone who has syphilis.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page ☐