



Syphilis

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Many of the signs and symptoms of syphilis are identical to other diseases so it is often called “the great imitator.”

How common is Syphilis?

In 2011 health officials reported over 46,000 cases of syphilis in the United States. More than half of the reported cases of primary & secondary stage syphilis occurred among men who have sex with men.

What are the symptoms of Syphilis?

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, but they remain at risk for complications if the infection is not treated. Transmission occurs from contact with a syphilis sore present in persons who are in the primary or secondary stage, but these sores may not be apparent. Most transmission is from persons who are unaware of the infection. A pregnant woman can also pass syphilis to her baby during pregnancy.

Primary Stage

The primary stage of syphilis is usually marked by a single sore (called a chancre), but there may be multiple sores. The chancre can appear 10 to 90 days after contact with the infection, with an average of 21 days. The chancre is usually firm, round, small, and painless and appears at the location where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts 3 to 6 weeks and will go away without treatment. However, if adequate treatment is not received the infection progresses to a secondary stage.

Secondary Stage

During the second stage, a person infected with syphilis may experience a skin rash and mucous membrane lesions. The rash, which may appear on one or more areas of the body, does not usually cause itching, and can be rough, red or reddish brown. The rash can appear on the palms of the hands or bottoms of the feet. The rashes associated with secondary syphilis can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. Sometimes rashes associated with secondary syphilis are so faint that they go unnoticed. Additional symptoms of secondary syphilis may include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will also heal with or without treatment, but without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and late stages of disease.

Late Stage

Once the secondary symptoms disappear, the latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins. Without treatment, the infection remains in the body and the infected person will still have syphilis even though there are no symptoms, meaning that the infection can still be passed to partners. In the late stages of syphilis, damage may be caused to the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This internal damage may show up many years later. Signs and symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. Damage in the late stage of syphilis is irreversible and may be serious enough to cause death.

How is Syphilis diagnosed?

There are two ways to diagnose syphilis. One way is to have a health care provider examine material from a chancre (infectious sore) using a dark-field microscope. If syphilis bacteria are present in the sore, they will show up when observed through the microscope. The second way is to have a blood test. Once infection occurs, the body produces syphilis antibodies that can be detected by a blood test.

You should visit your health care provider if you have a lesion in your genital area or a widespread rash. Also if you engage in unprotected sexual behaviors that may put you at risk for STDs or have been treated for other STDs such as gonorrhea or HIV infection, it is important to get tested for syphilis.

How is Syphilis treated?

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages. Penicillin (an antibiotic) will cure a person who has syphilis. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis. There are no home remedies or over-the-counter drugs that will cure syphilis. Treatment will kill the syphilis bacterium and prevent further damage, but it will not repair damage already done.

It is important for people who receive syphilis treatment to abstain from sexual contact until the chancres are completely healed. Persons with syphilis should notify their sex partners so that they can also have effective treatment if necessary.

McKinley Health Center can test and treat persons infected with syphilis.

How do you prevent Syphilis?

The surest way to avoid STDs, including syphilis, is to abstain from sexual contact. Correct and consistent use of condoms will greatly lower the risk of contracting the infection if the infected area is covered; this includes condom or latex barrier use during oral sex. Avoiding alcohol and drugs can also prevent the transmission of syphilis because these activities may increase the chances for risky behaviors. If you have been diagnosed and treated, you are still susceptible to contracting the infection again. If you or your partner have any signs of discharge, lesions, or rashes refrain from sexual activity and see a doctor.

References

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention (Feb. 11, 2013). *Syphilis-CDC Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm>.

National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Disease (Dec. 10, 2010). *Syphilis*. Retrieved from <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/syphilis/Pages/default.aspx>

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu>