

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



COUNTY MICHIGAN
HEALTH DIVISION

Department of Health & Human Services

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Syphilis

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore called a chancre.

How do you get Syphilis?

- Syphilis is spread during oral, anal or vaginal sex with someone who has untreated syphilis.
- Syphilis is passed to the unborn fetus if a pregnant woman is infected.

What are the symptoms of Syphilis?

Syphilis has three stages:

- **Primary stage:** Most commonly marked by the appearance of a sore or chancre. Some people develop multiple sores and others develop no visible signs of infection. The chancre is a painless, firm, reddish, round sore(s) that will appear 10-90 days (21 days on average) after intimate contact with an infected person. Chancres appear most often where the infection entered the body. They last three to six weeks and heal without treatment but syphilis is still in the body.
- **Secondary stage:** Rough, red or brownish rash that appears 6-12 weeks after contact. The non-itchy rash can appear anywhere on the body, but often occurs on the palms of the hands or on the sole of the feet. During this stage some people experience mild flu-like symptoms, patchy hair loss, and weight loss. Symptoms will go away in 2-6 weeks but syphilis is still in the body and can be spread to others.
- **Latent and late stage:** This stage begins when primary and secondary symptoms disappear. Without treatment, syphilis stays in the body even though there are no signs or symptoms. If symptoms are present they are very serious and often occur 10-20 years after the initial infection. Syphilis can slowly and permanently damage the heart, brain and other vital organs. Untreated syphilis can even cause death.

How is Syphilis diagnosed?

Soon after infection occurs the body produces syphilis antibodies that can be detected by a simple blood test.

How is Syphilis treated?

Syphilis can be treated with 1-3 injections of penicillin, depending on the stage. Other antibiotics are available for people who are allergic to penicillin. It is very important to complete the entire course of treatment and to have a follow-up exam to make sure that you are cured. There are no over the counter or home remedies to treat syphilis.

How can Syphilis be prevented?

- Don't have sex. You cannot give or get an STD if there is no contact with the penis, vagina, mouth or anus of an infected person.
- If you choose to have sex, use a condom with a water-based lubricant. Use a new condom every time.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. The more people you have sex with, the greater the chance of getting syphilis or another STD.
- Have regular medical exams if you are sexually active. If you think you have a STD, get tested.
- Tell your partner if you are infected. Tell anyone you have had sex with that they need to be tested.

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**For more information on Syphilis, call (248) 858-1406 or toll free
1 (800) 848-5533.**

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