

# Syphilis General Information

## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection. It is caused by a kind of bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*.

## How do people get syphilis?

Syphilis is spread by vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has an active syphilis infection. It is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Most often the sores are found on the genitals, but they can occur on the lips, in the mouth, or anywhere on the body.

Babies can get syphilis if their mother is infected because the bacteria can pass through the placenta during pregnancy.

## What are the symptoms?

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years. However, with or without symptoms, the syphilis infection will stay in the body until it is cured. If it is not treated it can cause serious complications.

While in the body, syphilis passes through many stages. At each of these stages there are different symptoms. The symptoms are:

- a painless sore that is round, flat and raised on the sides, like a large boil (because this sore is painless and can be hidden somewhere that you cannot see, you may not know you have a sore)
- rashes anywhere on the body, especially on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet
- swollen glands

In its later stages syphilis can cause symptoms in the heart, brain or other organs.

The first symptoms can start from 10 to 90 days (average 21 days) after contact with someone who has the infection.

## What is the treatment?

Syphilis can be treated with a penicillin injection or with other antibiotics prescribed by a doctor. It is important to take the medication until it is gone.

If you have syphilis, you must work with Public Health to notify your sex partners so that they also can be tested and treated if necessary.

## If I have syphilis once, can I get it again?

Yes, having syphilis once doesn't protect a person from getting it again. Even after your syphilis has been treated and cured, you can still get it again.

## How can you prevent syphilis?

The surest way to avoid syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections is to:

- Abstain from sexual contact, **OR**
- Have sexual contact with only one partner who you know is having sex only with you. You and your partner should both be tested and know that you are not infected before sexual contact occurs.

### To reduce your risk of getting syphilis:

- Limit the number of sexual partners you have.
- Practice safer sex for all sexual activities, including oral sex. Use condoms and dental dams.
- Do not have sexual contact if there are ulcers in your or your partner's genital area.
- Learn about prevention and control of sexually transmitted diseases.
- Talk to your doctor about getting tested for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections.

See your doctor if you have any symptoms of syphilis.