

Live Well to

Learn Well

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What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. More than 100,000 cases of syphilis are reported in the United States every year.

How can you get it?

Most often, transmission occurs through unprotected sexual contact — when the skin or mucous membranes of one sexual partner come into contact with a chancre (a painless ulcer/lesion) located on another partner's body. Transmission can occur without penetration, as chancres can be found at the site of any sexual contact (e.g., external genitals, within the vagina, or in or around the anus, rectum, or mouth).

Syphilis can also be transmitted from a pregnant person to the fetus. Called “congenital syphilis,” this can create serious consequences such as neurological problems or miscarriage.

Transmission cannot occur through contact with objects such as toilets or towels.

How would I know if I have it?

Syphilis can be a challenge to diagnose. It is often known as “the great imitator,” meaning that symptoms can be similar to other infections or medical conditions. There are several different “stages” of syphilis:

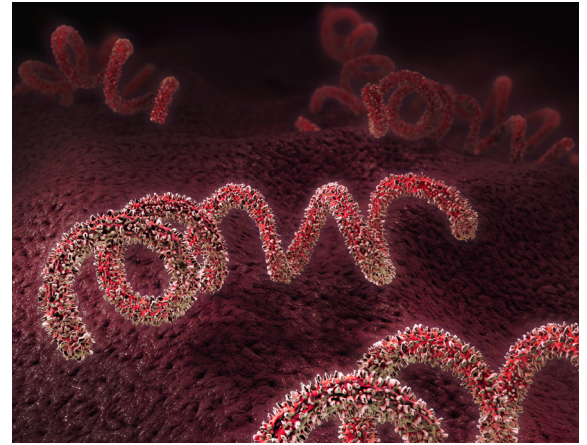
Primary syphilis:

The appearance of a chancre (painless ulcer/lesion) is the symptom of primary syphilis. It typically appears some time (10-90 days) after contact with an infected sexual partner and it spontaneously heals within 3-6 weeks, with or without treatment. (Note: chancres are not always noticeable due to the number and variety of places in which they occur.)

Secondary syphilis:

Secondary syphilis typically presents with the healing or the chancre(s) or within 1-6 months of chancre resolution. This stage is characterized by a rash that can affect the palms of the hands, soles of feet, or the chest and back.

Other symptoms of secondary syphilis may include a sore throat, fever, swollen lymph nodes, fatigue, muscle aches, patchy hair loss, and wart-like patches around the genitals/skin folds. These physical symptoms typically resolve in time. However, the infection is still contagious, and treatment is still necessary to prevent progression to the “latent” and “tertiary” stages of syphilis.



*Syphilis is caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. It can be difficult to diagnose, so be sure to get screened if you are at risk of infection (see “How can I get tested?”).*

Latent syphilis:

During the latent syphilis phase, the syphilis bacteria are still alive in your body, but you will no longer have no signs or symptoms of the infection. You're not contagious during this stage, but syphilis may affect your heart, brain, nerves, bones, and other parts of your body. This phase can last for years.

Tertiary syphilis:

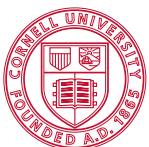
A small percentage of untreated syphilis cases will develop into the tertiary stage, typically 10-30 years after initial infection. This stage includes serious medical complications that can be fatal and involve multiple organs including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints.

How can I get tested?

Tested for syphilis is easy. A blood test called Rapid Plasma Reagin (RPR) is the recommended screening test for syphilis. If the RPR test result is positive, then a confirmatory test called the fluorescent treponemal antibody absorbed (FTA-ABS) will be done to detect the presence of specific antibodies to syphilis.

Who should be tested? How often?

Due to relative prevalence of syphilis within the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends: yearly screening for men / people assigned male at birth (AMAB) who have sex with other men / people AMAB (MSM); individuals living with HIV who are sexually active; those taking PrEP for HIV prevention; and those who are pregnant. Syphilis screening is recommended more often, every 3-6 months, for MSM with multiple sexual partners.



Treatment

Treating syphilis is relatively easy. A single shot of Benzathine penicillin, administered intramuscularly, is the recommended treatment for adults and adolescents with primary, secondary, or early latent syphilis. Abstaining from sexual activity is also necessary, until a chancre has fully resolved.

Sexual partners who may have been exposed should be notified for screening and treatment.

Follow-up screening is recommended for individuals at 6- and 12-month intervals.

How do I find out more

Please talk with a sexual health nurse or health care provider at Cornell Health. More information can be found at [cdc.gov/std/syphilis](https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis).