

Syphilis: What It Is and How It Is Treated

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that is spread through sexual contact (for example, vaginal, oral, or anal sex). If untreated, it can cause serious damage to your heart, lungs, nervous system, and other organs.

How do you get it?

You get it from having sexual contact with an infected person. The infection is passed through sores on the infected person's body.

What are the symptoms?

People with syphilis may get sores on their bodies. Although these sores may be found anywhere, they are most likely to be on the penis, vagina, anus, or rectum. Sometimes the sores can be on areas of the body that are difficult to see, so you may not notice them. After getting the sores, you may get a rash that looks like red, rough spots (often on your palms and soles). You may also feel tired, have headaches, have sore muscles, feel feverish, or lose patches of hair.

How can my doctor tell if I have it?

Your doctor can look at the sores and take samples to try to find the bacteria under a special microscope. Your blood can also be tested for

antibodies to the bacteria. Your doctor will test you for other sexually transmitted infections that you may have been exposed to, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

How is it treated?

The best treatment is penicillin. Most people who are treated early with penicillin are cured. If you are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available. It is important to tell your doctor about your sex partners so they can be treated too.

After you are treated, you should not have sexual contact with anyone until your sores have healed and your doctor says that you can no longer transmit the infection. Once you have been treated for syphilis, it is possible to get it again from sexual contact with an infected person.

How can I prevent it?

You can prevent syphilis by not having sex. If you are sexually active, using a condom correctly and with every sexual act can greatly reduce your risk of getting syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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