

Fact Sheet: Syphilis

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Sometimes symptoms are not easily seen and go unnoticed. Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore.

What are the symptoms?

Syphilis has three stages

Stage 1:

- A firm, painless, round, small sore (or sores), called a chancre, will appear 10-90 (average 21 days) days after intimate contact with someone who is infected.
- The sores appear most often where the infection entered the body, on the head or shaft of the penis, around the vaginal opening and rectum, inside the vagina, on the cervix, in the mouth, or on fingers.
- The sore(s) will go away in 3-6 weeks, but syphilis is still in the body and can be transmitted to others.

Stage 2:

- Rough, red or brown spots appear 6-12 weeks after contact.
- Sometimes the rash may be so faint that it isn't noticeable.
- The rash can appear anywhere on the body, but often occurs on the palms of the hand or on the soles of the feet and is not itchy.
- 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 transmitted to others.

Stage 3:

A person may never have symptoms again. However, if they do have symptoms they are very serious and often occur many years after initial infection. Syphilis can slowly and permanently damage your heart, brain and other vital organs. It can even cause death.

If you suspect you have been exposed to syphilis, seek testing and treatment as soon as possible.

How is it spread?

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

How is it treated?

- Syphilis can be treated and cured with 1-3 injections of penicillin (other antibiotics are available for people who are allergic to penicillin), depending on the stage.
- If more than 24 hours have passed since the start of treatment, syphilis is not likely to be transmitted.
- You can be tested and treated by your private medical provider or at the Washtenaw County Public Health Department.
- 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 is it prevented?

- **Don't have sex.** You cannot give or get an STD if there is no contact with the penis, vagina, mouth or anus.
- **Limit your number of sexual partners.** The more people you have sex with, the greater the chance of getting an STD.
- **If you choose to have sex, be prepared.** Have condoms with a water-based lubricant on hand and use a new condom every time you have sex.
- **Have regular exams if you are sexually active.** If you think you have an STD, get tested. Ask your partner(s) to get tested.
- **Remember: a Pap smear is not a test for STDs.** Ask to be tested if you are at risk.
- **Telling your partner.** Tell anyone you have had sex with that they need to be tested.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

