

Patient Information:

Syphilis

Questions and Answers

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. If left untreated, it can cause significant and serious complications including death.

How does someone get Syphilis?

Syphilis is spread by sexual contact including vaginal, anal and oral sex. The syphilis bacterium is transmitted through direct contact with syphilis sores, which mainly occur in the genital area of both men and women. The sores are often painless and therefore, the person might not realize that they are infected. The time from contact with the bacteria to the onset of symptoms may be one to thirteen weeks.

How can Syphilis be prevented?

Risk factors for syphilis include having unprotected sex without using latex condoms, having sex with more than one partner, having sex with someone who has had multiple sex partners and/or IV drug use. To reduce the risk of becoming infected, use latex condoms whenever there is any genital to genital contact, get to know your partner(s) and limit the number of sexual partners.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

- ◆ Syphilis occurs in three stages.
- ◆ Primary or early symptoms: The first symptom of syphilis is usually a small painless sore called a chancre. It occurs in the area of sexual contact including the penis, vagina, anus, rectum or mouth. The sore usually appears 2 to 6 weeks after exposure and disappears within a few weeks. Even though the symptoms disappear, the syphilis bacterium remains within the body.
- ◆ Secondary symptoms: Shortly after the sore heals, a rash appears that covers the body. This rash will include the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Swollen lymph nodes, fever or fatigue might also occur. These symptoms disappear within a few weeks but the bacteria remain within the body.

- ◆ Latent symptoms: During the latent stage there may not be specific symptoms. Without treatment, the disease may damage the reproductive organs, skin, heart or nervous system. Infection with syphilis also increases the risk of acquiring HIV infection.

What is the impact of syphilis on pregnancy?

If left untreated, syphilis can be passed from mother to the infant before birth resulting in congenital syphilis. Babies with congenital syphilis may suffer from blindness, other severe organ damage and possibly death.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

Usually a blood test is required to diagnose syphilis. A sample from a syphilitic sore can also be examined under a microscope.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

The treatment and cure for syphilis is an antibiotic. People who have had syphilis for under a year can usually be cured with one dose of the antibiotic. It may require multiple doses if the person has been infected for a long time. The sexual partner must be treated in order to prevent re-infection. Blood tests are usually done after treatment to be sure the treatment was successful.