



Sedgwick County...  
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Health Department

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fastFACTS

about Sedgwick County Government

## Syphilis

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*.

### How common is syphilis?

Despite significant national progress towards the elimination of syphilis and sustained declines in incidence over decades, syphilis rates are now increasing again, nationally and locally. In the United States, health officials reported over 33,000 cases of syphilis in 2005. The incidence of infectious syphilis was highest in women 20 to 24 years of age and in men 35 to 39 years of age.

### How do people get syphilis?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Transmission of the organism occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with the disease can pass it to the babies they are carrying. *Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.*

### What are the signs and symptoms in adults?

Syphilis has three stages: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary or late stage. Primary syphilis takes the form of a painless chancre (or sore); this stage can last from 1-5 weeks. Secondary syphilis takes the form of a body rash that appears on the trunk of the body, palms of hands, and bottoms of the feet. This stage can last anywhere from 2-6 weeks. Tertiary syphilis begins to damage the internal organs including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This internal damage may show up years later and may include symptoms such as numbness, loss of muscle coordination, hair loss, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

### How is syphilis diagnosed?

Shortly after infection occurs, the body produces syphilis antibodies that can be detected by an accurate, safe, and inexpensive blood test. Because untreated syphilis in a pregnant woman can infect and possibly kill her developing baby, every pregnant woman should have a blood test for syphilis.

### What is link between syphilis and HIV?

Genital sores caused by syphilis make it easier to transmit and acquire HIV infection sexually. There is an estimated 2- to 5-fold increased risk of acquiring HIV infection when syphilis is present.

### What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis can be treated with Penicillin; the dosage may vary depending on the stage of syphilis a person is in.

### How can syphilis be prevented?

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. Condoms can prevent transmission, but this method does not provide complete protection from sores and lesions.

### For more information

Visit the Sedgwick County  
Health Department Web page at  
[www.sedgwickcounty.org](http://www.sedgwickcounty.org)  
or call 660-7300.