

# Facts & DETAILS

## Syphilis

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### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*.

### How common is syphilis?

Once nearing elimination, syphilis cases have continued to increase in recent years. In 2016, there were approximately 88,000 new cases reported in the United States, compared to less than 6,000 cases reported in 2000.

### How do people become infected?

Syphilis is spread from person to person during vaginal, anal, or oral sex or from direct exposure to a syphilis sore (chancre). Pregnant women can give syphilis to unborn babies.

### What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

Syphilis has three stages: primary, secondary, and tertiary (late) stage. Primary syphilis is indicated by a painless sore; this stage can last one to five weeks. Secondary syphilis symptoms may include a rash on the trunk, extremities, palms, or bottoms of the feet. Not everyone who has syphilis will develop a rash. This stage can last two to six weeks. After secondary, tertiary syphilis symptoms are damage to the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. The internal damage may show up years later and may include symptoms such as numbness, loss of muscle coordination, hair loss, gradual blindness, dementia, and even death.

### What is congenital syphilis?

Congenital syphilis is a disease that occurs when a mother with syphilis passes the infection to her baby during pregnancy. Congenital syphilis can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, low birth weight, or infant death. Babies born with congenital syphilis may have deformed bones, severe anemia (low blood count), enlarged liver and spleen, jaundice (yellowing of skin or eyes), brain and nerve problems, meningitis (inflammation of brain or spinal cord), or skin rashes.

### How long can you spread syphilis?

After exposure, symptoms appear in 10 to 90 days. Syphilis can be spread until antibiotic treatment is completed. A person with syphilis cannot clear the infection without antibiotic treatment.

### Who is at risk for syphilis?

Anyone who is sexually active can be infected with syphilis, but sexually active people with multiple partners, men who have sex with men, people who have unprotected sex, and people with HIV have a higher risk for infection. All pregnant women should be routinely tested for syphilis.

Genital sores caused by syphilis allow human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) to enter the body, making it easier to get HIV. Someone with syphilis or other STIs may also be more likely to get HIV because the same behaviors and circumstances that put them at risk for getting other STIs put them at greater risk for getting HIV. In the United States, approximately half of men who have sex with men with primary and secondary syphilis are also living with HIV.

### How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is caused by a bacteria, so it can be treated with antibiotics. The penicillin or similar antibiotic dosage depends on the syphilis stage. Syphilis can be diagnosed using a blood test.

### How can you prevent syphilis?

There is no vaccine to prevent syphilis. Some ways to prevent infection include:

- Reduce the number of sexual partners
- Use a condom correctly every time you have sex
- Notify all partners about your syphilis infection, so they can be treated

Syphilis testing, counseling, and treatment can be done at the Sedgwick County Division of Health, 2716 West Central Avenue, Wichita, Kansas.

For More Information:  
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Wichita, KS 67214  
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