

## **SYPHILIS FAQ**

### **What is Syphilis?**

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It has often been called “the great imitator” because so many of the signs and symptoms are indistinguishable from those of other diseases.

### **How do people get syphilis?**

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth. 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 symptoms of syphilis?**

A sore, known as a primary lesion, appears about 3 weeks after a person has been exposed. This lesion may be on or around the mouth, genitals or anus. It is small and painless, and usually goes away in about 3 weeks even without medicine. The primary lesion is highly infectious, meaning that anyone who touches it will almost certainly become infected with syphilis. However, because the lesion is so small and painless, it often goes unnoticed by the infected person or the people with whom they are having sex.

Approximately 4 weeks after the primary sore goes away different symptoms known as secondary symptoms may appear. These secondary symptoms can look like many common skin problems. Some people get rashes on their arms, legs, face, back, or stomach. One of the most common places people infected with syphilis get a rash is on the palms of their hands and/or the soles of their feet. People may get a rash inside their mouth, which will look like white patches, and may lose their hair, eyebrows, and/or eyelashes due to a rash in those areas. Condylomata lata are wet, raised wart-like rashes of the genital area. These secondary rashes are not as infectious as the primary sore, but if the rash is in the genital area (condylomata lata) or the mouth (mucous patches) an infected person can spread syphilis during this time as well. These secondary symptoms last about four weeks and will usually fade and then disappear without any medicine

### **How would I know if I have syphilis?**

If you have a sore on your genitals, have an STD check. Special tests can diagnose syphilis from sores. A blood test for syphilis can be done. You could have syphilis and not know it. Anytime you have a test for STDs, ask for a syphilis blood test also.

### **Does Syphilis pose special problems for people with HIV?**

It can. People with HIV sometimes have unusual results (higher or lower than they should be) on syphilis blood tests, which can make syphilis harder to diagnose. People with HIV also may have increased risk for neurosyphilis, syphilis complications involving the brain and nervous system. Also, people with HIV are more likely to have treatment failure using the regular doses of antibiotics for syphilis, and may need higher doses. Therefore, if you have HIV and are treated for syphilis, it is important that you follow up carefully with a doctor to make sure your syphilis infection has been successfully cured. Syphilis also makes it much easier for people with HIV to transmit HIV to their sex partners.

### **Can Syphilis be cured?**

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages. A single intramuscular injection of penicillin, an antibiotic, will cure a person who has had syphilis for less than a year. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis. There are no home remedies or over-the-counter drugs that will cure syphilis. Treatment will kill the syphilis bacterium and prevent further damage, but it will not repair damage already done.

Because effective treatment is available, it is important that persons be screened for syphilis on an on-going basis if their sexual behaviors put them at risk for STDs.

Persons who receive syphilis treatment must abstain from sexual contact with new partners until the syphilis sores are completely healed. Persons with syphilis must notify their sex partners so that they also can be tested and receive treatment if necessary.

### **Once I'm cured, can I get syphilis again?**

Yes. If you have sex with an untreated partner, you can get syphilis again and you would need to be treated all over again.

### **Do condoms work for syphilis?**

Using a condom correctly and consistently can reduce the risk of syphilis. You should note, though, that if the syphilis sore or open rash is not in an area protected by the condom, you could still get syphilis. And if you have oral sex without a condom (giving or getting), you can still get syphilis.

### **Can I get help in telling my partners?**

Yes. If you have tested positive for syphilis you can talk with a public health worker who will help you notify your partner(s) privately or they can tell your partner(s) for you. The public health worker can take responsibility for getting your partner(s) tested and treated. Your name will not be used. This is a very effective way to prevent complications for you and your partner and it also keeps this infection from being passed around.

If you need help in notifying current or past partners, you may call (317) 221-8314 and ask to speak with a Field Worker (DIS). All information will be kept strictly confidential.