

UniversityHealthServices

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Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that, if left untreated, may cause serious damage.

What Causes Syphilis?

Syphilis is caused by a spirochete called *Treponema pallidum*.

What are the Symptoms of Syphilis?

The symptoms of Syphilis usually appear ten to ninety days after exposure. A syphilis infection usually occurs in three stages:

Primary Stage: A small painless sore, called a chancre (pronounced “shanker”) will appear at the site where the spirochete entered into the skin. The chancre will usually appear ten to ninety days after exposure.

The chancre may disappear without treatment, but this does not mean the disease has been cured.

Secondary State: Two to six weeks after the primary stage, rashes, fever, and generalized muscle aches will usually occur. This is the most contagious stage. Even without treatment, all symptoms may disappear; but again this does not mean that the disease has been cured.

Tertiary Stage: If the Syphilis infection is left untreated, the spirochete may attack the brain, heart, and other organs, sometimes leading to death. Although at this stage Syphilis can be treated, treatment will not reverse the damage already done to the organs. This stage usually appears two to five years after the initial infection.

How is Syphilis Transmitted?

Syphilis is transmitted through oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with someone in the infectious stage of the disease. It can also be transmitted by blood, blood products, or shared needles with IV drug use.

How is Syphilis Diagnosed?

Syphilis is usually diagnosed through a blood test performed four to six weeks after infection.

How is Syphilis Treated?

Syphilis is usually treated with appropriate antibiotics. Without treatment, symptoms may disappear but the organism will remain in the body causing permanent damage to the nervous and cardiovascular systems, resulting in eventual death. All sexual partners must be treated.

How Can I Prevent Syphilis and Other Sexually Transmissible Diseases?

If you choose to be sexually active:

Know your partner(s):

- Talk to your partner(s) about their health status and STD history before becoming sexually intimate.

Be honest with your partner:

- Be as responsible and honest with your partner(s) as you would want them to be with you.

Engage in safer sex:

- Avoid sexual intimacy when you or your partner has an active STD. The use of an alternate means of sexual pleasuring (such as manual stimulation) can help you avoid contracting or transmitting an infection during this time.
- Barrier methods of contraception, such as diaphragms, spermicides, and condoms, may help prevent the spread of STDs, but this varies with the specific infection. With Syphilis, condoms may offer some protection.

Maintain a high level of health:

- Responsible sexual behavior, accompanied by eating right, reducing stress and getting enough sleep may help to increase resistance to infection.
- Remember that having had Syphilis does not protect you from getting it or another STD again.

Advice Nurse and Test Results

Please call the nurse for advice and test results: 863-4463

Appointments

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit. To schedule or cancel appointments, call 863-0774

For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at www.sa.psu.edu/uhs

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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