

Primary Stage

The first sign of syphilis is a sore, usually on the genitals but it may be at other sites of sexual contact. The sore may occur in hidden sites (cervix, mouth, anus) and because it is usually painless it may go unnoticed. It usually appears three to four weeks after infection, but sometimes it takes longer. The sore will disappear on its own within a few weeks.

Even though the sore heals, you still have the syphilis infection and can pass it onto others.

Secondary Stage

Later on, sometimes a rash will appear quite suddenly about six weeks after infection. It may appear on the body, face, arms and often on the palms and soles of the feet.

The presentation of the rash will vary from person to person and may even vary on different parts of the body of the same person.

It may be very obvious but it may also be so mild as to pass unnoticed, and often disappears as suddenly as it appeared. The rash lasts up to four to six weeks.

There may also be:

- mouth ulcers
- headache
- swollen glands
- fever
- hair loss
- general tiredness
- flat warty growths in the genital or anal region.

A person in primary or secondary stage of syphilis is very infectious because the sores and rashes are full of syphilis bacteria. There is a very high chance of infecting a sexual partner.

"Syphilis is also known as the 'great imitator' as symptoms are quite non-specific and can appear like many other infections. Nearly half of people with Syphilis do not have any symptoms at all"

Latent Stage

The latent stage of syphilis is a period of time when there are no visible signs or symptoms of syphilis. If you do not receive treatment, you can continue to have syphilis in your body for years without any signs or symptoms. A latent period has been known to last 10-30 years.

Tertiary Stage

Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop tertiary syphilis. However, when it does happen it can affect many different organ systems. These include the heart and blood vessels, and the brain and nervous system. Tertiary syphilis is very serious and would occur 10-30 years after your infection began. In tertiary syphilis, the disease damages your internal organs and can result in death.

Without treatment, syphilis can spread to the brain and nervous system (neurosyphilis) or to the eye (ocular syphilis). This can happen during any of the stages described above.

Symptoms of neurosyphilis include

- severe headache;
- difficulty coordinating muscle movements;
- paralysis (not able to move);
- numbness; and
- dementia (mental disorder).

How do you get Syphilis?

Syphilis is very infectious and is caught by having sexual contact with an infected person. This may include vaginal, anal, or oral sex, or just close skin-to-skin contact.

Mother to child transmission

Syphilis can also be spread from mother to baby during pregnancy, if the mother is infected. An infected baby may be born without symptoms of syphilis, but could develop them within a few weeks and the baby could become very ill. However, proper treatment of the mother during pregnancy will prevent the baby being born with syphilis.

How can you avoid Syphilis?

The only sure way to avoid getting syphilis or another sexually transmitted infection is to not have sexual contact.

If you do decide to have sexual contact, you can reduce your risk by:

- Having sex with one person, who only has sex with you.
- Using condoms until you and your sexual partner(s) have been checked for sexually transmitted infections.
- Having regular sexual health check-ups

Can Syphilis be treated?

Yes! Syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. Treatments will vary depending on the type and stage of infection. Most treatments are successful. Some severe infections may need a further course of treatment after one year to ensure the infection is cured.

Treatment cannot undo damage already done. So, it is important to get screened frequently to catch it early. If you have symptoms, see a doctor immediately.