

# Fact Sheet: Syphilis

## What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a serious sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*. This disease usually infects the genital area, but can cause sores on the lips and in the mouth. If not properly treated, syphilis can cause long term health problems and even death.

## Signs and Symptoms

### Primary Stage:

- Chancre sore (round, hard, painless bump) appears where infection entered the body; lasts 3-6 weeks and heals regardless of treatment
- If no treatment is given, infection progresses to second stage

### Secondary Stage:

- Skin rashes: normally rough and red/reddish brown on palms of hands and/or bottoms of feet, but can be any kind; Does not itch
- Skin sores on mouth, vagina, or anus
- Lesions that are raised, white/grey patches that occur in moist areas, such as underarm or groin
- Other symptoms include fever, swollen lymph glands, hair loss, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue
- Symptoms disappear regardless of treatment, but if there is still no treatment, infection progresses to latent or late stage

### Latent and Late Stage:

- Latent, or the “hidden”, stage occurs when all symptoms have disappeared.
- In Late Stage, the infection damages all internal organs, resulting in poor muscle coordination, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, dementia, and sometimes death.

## How is it spread?

Syphilis is spread from person-to-person through direct contact with a syphilis sore, called a chancre, that occurs during anal, vaginal, or oral sex with an infected person. Chancres can be found on the genitals, on the anus, in the rectum, on the lips, and in the mouth.

Pregnant women can also spread syphilis to their unborn child.

## Treatment

Syphilis can easily be treated and cured with the appropriate antibiotics prescribed by a doctor; however, antibiotics cannot cure any damage already done.

Infected individuals should not have sex until all sores are healed and should notify sex partners so that they can be tested and treated if need be.

## Prevention

- Use a condom the correct way every time you have vaginal or anal sex, and use a dental dam during oral sex.
- Be part of a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with someone who has been tested and is uninfected.
- As always, abstaining from anal, vaginal, and oral sex is the most effective way to prevent syphilis and other STIs.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care professional. For more information about communicable disease, speak to your health care provider or call the Ingham County Health Department at (517)-887-4308.

Visit our website at <http://hd.ingham.org>

or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/DiseasesConditions/>  
Ingham County Health Department 5303 S. Cedar St. Lansing, MI 48911

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