



# Syphilis and Sexual Health

Caring for you and your baby



Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, a Division of Health Care Service Corporation, a Mutual Legal Reserve Company, an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association

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## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is an infection one can get from sexual activity that may result in serious health problems. The infection builds in four stages: primary; secondary; latent and tertiary. Each stage can have different symptoms that we discuss in this brochure.

## How is syphilis spread?

You can get syphilis by touching a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal or oral sex. Syphilis can also spread from a mother with syphilis to her unborn baby.

You cannot get syphilis by touching:

- toilet seats
- doorknobs
- swimming pools
- hot tubs
- bathtubs
- sharing clothing or eating utensils

## How can I reduce my risk of getting syphilis?

The only way to avoid infections from sexual activity is to not have vaginal, anal or oral sex. If you are sexually active, you can lower your chances of getting syphilis by:

- Being in a long-term relationship with a partner who has been tested and does not have syphilis. You both agree to have sex only with one another and no one else.
- Using condoms the right way each time you have sex. Condoms stop the spread of syphilis by covering a sore so it does not touch the other person. Sometimes sores are in places not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can transmit syphilis.

## Am I at risk for syphilis?

Sexually active people can get syphilis through vaginal, anal or oral sex with a partner who has syphilis. If you are sexually active, have an honest and open talk with your provider. Ask them if you should get tested for syphilis or other infections spread through sexual activity.

You should get tested often for syphilis if you are sexually active and:

- are a gay or bisexual man
- have HIV
- are taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention
- have partner(s) who have tested positive for syphilis

All pregnant women should get syphilis testing at their first prenatal visit. Some need to get syphilis testing again during the third trimester at 28 weeks and at giving birth.

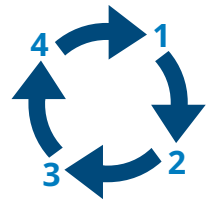
## I'm pregnant. How does syphilis affect my baby?

If you are pregnant and have syphilis, you can give the infection to your unborn baby. Having syphilis can lead to a low-birth-weight baby. It can make it more likely you will deliver your baby too early or stillborn (a baby born dead). **To protect your baby, you should get syphilis testing at least once during your pregnancy. Get treatment right away if you test positive.**

At birth, a baby with a syphilis infection may not have signs or symptoms of disease. But, if the baby does not get treatment right away, he or she may have serious problems within a few weeks, such as cataracts, deafness or seizures and can die.

## What are the signs and symptoms of syphilis?

There are four stages of syphilis. Each stage has different signs and symptoms.



### Primary Stage: Sores

During the first stage of syphilis, you may notice a single sore or many sores. The sore is the place where syphilis entered your body. You can infect your partner with syphilis at this stage. These sores most often occur in, on or around the following areas of the body:

- penis
- rectum
- vagina
- lips or in the mouth
- anus

Sores are often, but not always, firm, round and painless. Because the sore is painless, you may not notice it. The sore usually lasts three to six weeks and heals whether you get treatment or not. Even after the sore goes away, you must still receive treatment. This will stop your infection from moving to the secondary stage.



## Secondary Stage: Rash and Sores

During the second stage, you may have skin rashes and/or sores in your mouth, vagina or anus. This stage usually starts with a rash on one or more parts of your body. The rash can show up when your first sore is healing or many weeks after the sore has healed. The rash can be on the palms of your hands and/or the bottoms of your feet and look:

- rough
- red
- reddish-brown

The rash usually will not itch. Sometimes it is so faint that you will not notice it. Other symptoms are:

- fever
- swollen lymph glands
- sore throat
- patchy hair loss
- headaches
- weight loss
- muscle aches
- fatigue (feeling very tired)

The symptoms from this stage will go away even if you do not get treatment. Without the right treatment, your infection will move to the latent and possibly tertiary stages of syphilis. You can infect your partner with syphilis at this stage also.

## Latent Stage: No Visible Symptoms

The third stage of syphilis has no visible signs or symptoms. You can infect your partner with syphilis at this stage, which is within a year of your being infected. Without treatment, you can continue to have syphilis in your body for years.

## Tertiary Stage: Serious Health Problems

Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop the fourth stage of syphilis. But when it does happen, it can affect many different organ systems: the heart and blood vessels; the brain and nervous system. Tertiary syphilis occurs 10 to 30 years after your infection began. The disease harms your internal organs and can result in death. A health care provider can usually diagnose tertiary syphilis with many tests.



## What other health problems does syphilis cause?

### **Neurosyphilis, Ocular syphilis and Otosyphilis**

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

#### **Signs and symptoms of *neurosyphilis* are:**

- severe headache
- muscle weakness and/or trouble with muscle movements
- changes to your mental state, such as trouble focusing, confusion, personality change and/or dementia plus problems with memory, thinking and/or making decisions.

#### **Signs and symptoms of *ocular syphilis* are:**

- eye pain and/or redness
- changes in your eyesight
- blindness

#### **Signs and symptoms of *otosyphilis* are:**

- hearing loss
- ringing, buzzing, roaring or hissing in the ears called 'tinnitus'
- dizziness or vertigo, feeling like you or your surroundings are moving or spinning

## **How will I or my health care providers know if I have syphilis?**

Most of the time, health care providers will use a blood test to test for syphilis. Some will diagnose syphilis by testing fluid from a syphilis sore.

## **Is there a cure for syphilis?**

Yes, syphilis is curable with the right antibiotics. But, treatment might not heal damage the infection caused.

## **Can I get syphilis again after getting treatment?**

Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Follow-up testing is needed to make sure your treatment was successful. Even after successful treatment, you can get syphilis again. Lab tests can confirm whether you have syphilis.

It may not be obvious that a sex partner has syphilis. Syphilis sores in the vagina, anus, mouth or under the foreskin of the penis can be hard to see. If your sex partner(s) does not get testing and treatment, you can get syphilis again.

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CHÚ Ý: Nếu bạn nói Tiếng Việt, có các dịch vụ hỗ trợ ngôn ngữ miễn phí dành cho bạn. Gọi số 1-855-710-6984 (TTY: 711).