



# Fact Sheet: Syphilis

## What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD). People who come in contact with the sores or rash of a person infected with syphilis are at risk of getting the disease. Sometimes symptoms are not easily seen and go unnoticed.

## What are the symptoms?

Syphilis has three stages

### Stage 1:

- A hard, painless, reddish sore (or sores), called a chancre, will appear 10-90 days after intimate contact with someone who is infected.
- The sores appear most often where the infection entered the body – on the head or shaft of the penis, around the vaginal opening and rectum, inside the vagina, on the cervix, in the mouth, or on fingers.
- The sore(s) will go away in 1-5 weeks, but syphilis is still in the body and can be transmitted to others.

### Stage 2:

- Red or pigmented skin rashes appear 6-12 weeks after contact.
- The rash can appear anywhere on the body, but often occurs on the palms of the hand or on the soles of the feet.
- Mild flu-like symptoms
- Symptoms will go away in 2-6 weeks, but syphilis is still in the body and can be transmitted to others.

### Stage 3:

- A person may never have symptoms again. However, if they do have symptoms they are very serious and often occur many years after initial infection. Syphilis can slowly and permanently damage your heart, brain and other vital organs. It can even cause death.

If you suspect you have been exposed, seek testing as soon as possible.

## How is it spread?

- Syphilis is spread during oral, anal or vaginal sex with someone who has untreated syphilis.
- It can also be transmitted through any skin-to-skin contact with the rash or sores on an infected person.
- Syphilis is passed to the unborn fetus if the mother is infected.

## How is it treated?

Syphilis can be treated with 1-3 injections of the antibiotic penicillin (depending on the stage). For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis. If more than 24 hours have passed since the start of treatment, syphilis is not likely to be transmitted. You can be tested and treated at your private medical provider or at the Genesee County Health Department. It is very important to complete the entire course of treatment and to have a follow-up exam to make sure that you are cured.

## How is it prevented?

- **Don't have sex.** You cannot give or get an STD if there is no contact with the penis, vagina, mouth or anus of an infected person.
- **Limit your number of sexual partners.** The more people you have sex with, the greater the chance of getting syphilis.
- **If you choose to have sex, be prepared.** Use condoms with a water-based lubricant and use a new condom every time you have sex.
- **Have regular exams if you are sexually active.** If you think you have syphilis, get tested. Ask your partner(s) to get tested.
- **Remember: a Pap smear is not a test for syphilis.**
- **Ask to be tested if you are at risk.**
- **Tell your partner if you are infected;** tell anyone you have had sex with that they need to be tested. If they are not treated they may be harmed for the rest of their lives and may also pass it back to you.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or 257-3612.*

Visit our website at: [www.gchd.us](http://www.gchd.us) or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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