

Syphilis Information Sheet

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum* subspecies *pallidum*. It has been called “The Great Pretender”, as symptoms can resemble other diseases.

Symptoms of Syphilis

There are distinct stages of a syphilis infection with differing symptoms at each stage.

Primary Stage:

A skin lesion, called a chancre, is the first sign of a syphilis infection. Chancres appear at the location where syphilis entered the body between 10 and 90 days after infection. A single, firm, round, and painless chancre may appear, or multiple painful chancres may be present (1). Chancres last for three to six weeks and heal whether or not treatment is received. If untreated, the infection progresses to the secondary stage (2).

Secondary Stage:

Skin rashes and/or lesions in the mouth, vagina, or anus occur during the secondary stage of infection. These may appear when the primary chancre is healing, several weeks after it has healed, or in individuals who never experienced or noticed a chancre (3). Syphilis rashes can include rough red spots on the palms, large, raised, gray or white lesions in the mouth, underarm or groin, or rashes that are so faint that they are unnoticed (1).

Additional symptoms in the secondary stage can include fever, sore throat, hair loss, weight loss, swollen lymph glands, headaches, muscle aches, and fatigue. Rare complications include inflammation of the liver, joints, and optic nerve, kidney disease, and interstitial keratitis. Secondary symptoms will disappear whether or not treatment is received, but the infection will progress to the latent stage if adequate treatment is not received (2).

Latent Stage:

There are no visible signs or symptoms of syphilis during the latent (hidden) stage. However, syphilis-causing bacteria (*T. pallidum*) are still present. The latent stage can last for many years, with 15-40% of untreated individuals developing tertiary syphilis (4).

Tertiary Stage:

In rare cases, the latent stage progresses to a potentially fatal tertiary stage. This can occur 10-30 years or more after acquiring a syphilis infection. Multiple different organ systems can be affected including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, liver, bones, and joints. The associated symptoms vary depending on the affected body parts.

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At what stages is syphilis contagious?

Syphilis is highly contagious during the primary and secondary stages of infection. Individuals in the early part of the latent stage are still contagious, particularly as relapses into the secondary stage occur in around 25% of infected individuals (5). When relapses no longer occur, a person is not contagious through contact. However, infected pregnant women in the latent stage are still at increased risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, infant death shortly after delivery, and passing syphilis to the baby (congenital syphilis) (6).

Who is at risk of syphilis?

The syphilis-causing bacterium is able to pass through intact mucous membranes or compromised skin, and is primarily transmitted during sexual contact, or during pregnancy or childbirth from an infected mother to her infant. Transmission can occur by kissing near a chancre, and through oral, vaginal, and anal sex. The majority of cases in the United States occur in men who have sex with men (1). Other populations with increased risk include HIV-positive individuals, sex workers, and those who have been incarcerated (7).

How is syphilis diagnosed?

Laboratory analyses of a blood sample are required for syphilis diagnosis. The tests are known as nontreponemal and treponemal tests, and both types of tests are required for an accurate diagnosis.

How is syphilis treated?

Benzathine penicillin G is used to treat syphilis. A single intramuscular dose is required for individuals in the primary, secondary, and early latent stages, while three doses are required in the late latent stage. Treatment cures the disease and prevents transmission, but does not prevent reinfection or repair tissue damage. There is currently no effective vaccine available for syphilis (8).

How do I reduce my risk?

Abstaining from vaginal, anal, or oral sex is the only way to completely avoid sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis. Other ways to reduce the risk include being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has tested negative for syphilis and using latex condoms correctly. However, if the condom does not cover a syphilis chancre, transmission can still occur during sexual contact.

Where can I find more info?

Visit www.genetrackdiagnostics.com for full test information, including specimen collection requirements

CONTACT US:

Email: support@genetrackdiagnostics.com

Phone: 1-888-802-0703

NOTE:

This brochure is provided for general information purposes only. It is not intended to replace medical advice from a health professional.

References:

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