



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A contagious, sexually-transmitted disease that causes widespread tissue destruction. Syphilis is known as the “great mimic,” because its symptoms resemble those of many other diseases. It involves the genitals, skin, and central nervous system. There are two types: Newborns (0 to 2 weeks) born to mothers with syphilis (congenital form); and the type that affects persons of all ages and both sexes who acquire it through sexual contact (contagious form).

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

First stage (contagious; appears 3 to 6 days after contact):

- A painless, red sore (chancre) on the genitals, mouth or rectum. The sore usually affects the penis in males and vagina or cervix in females.

Second stage (contagious; begins 6 or more weeks after the chancre appears):

- Enlarged lymph glands in the neck, armpit or groin.
- Headache.
- Rash on skin and mucous membranes of the penis, vagina or mouth. The rash has small, red, scaly bumps.
- Fever (sometimes).

Third stage (noncontagious; may appear years after the first and second stages):

- Mental deterioration.
- Sexual impotence.
- Loss of balance.
- Loss of feeling or shooting pains in the legs.
- Heart disease.

CAUSES

The infecting germ for both forms is *Treponema pallidum*.

- The congenital form is spread to the fetus through the bloodstream.
- The contagious form is spread by intimate sexual contact with someone who has syphilis in the first or second stages.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Multiple sexual partners.
- Sexual activity between homosexual males.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Obtain blood serum test for syphilis early in pregnancy. If infected, get immediate treatment.
- Use rubber condoms during intercourse.
- Avoid any sexual contact if you suspect or know a partner is infected.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Usually curable in 3 months with treatment. In spite of treatment, syphilis returns within 1 year in 10% of patients. If this happens, re-treatment is necessary.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Widespread tissue destruction and death without treatment.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include laboratory studies, such as a blood serum test for syphilis, a microscopic exam of discharge from the chancre, and a study of spinal fluid. Tests are repeated after treatment.
- Ensure that all your sexual partners obtain treatment. The public health department will work with you to notify contacts confidentially and help them obtain treatment.
- After treatment, have blood studies done each month for 6 months to check for recurrence. Then repeat blood studies every 3 months for 2 years.
- Additional information is available from the:
CDC National STD & AIDS Hotlines 1-800-227-8922;
www.cdc.gov/std

MEDICATION

- Penicillin by injection unless you are allergic to it. If penicillin cannot be used, other antibiotics will be equally as effective.
- Topical medications as needed for skin symptoms.

ACTIVITY

Avoid sexual intercourse until cure is complete. Then use rubber condoms during sexual intercourse.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of syphilis.
- The following occur during or after treatment:
Fever.
Skin rash, sore throat or swelling in any joint, such as the ankle or knee.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.
- You once had syphilis and have not had a medical check-up in the past year.
- You have had sexual contact with someone who has syphilis.