

# Syphilis

## What is syphilis and who should be tested?

- It is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that both men and women can get.
- Syphilis is increasing in New York and other cities. It is especially important for men who have sex with men, and men with HIV, to be tested regularly for syphilis and other STDs.
- Anyone who has unsafe sex (such as sex without a condom or sex with multiple partners) should *also* be tested regularly for syphilis.

## How is syphilis spread?

- It is spread through any direct contact with a syphilis sore, usually during vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- Kissing can spread it if there are syphilis sores in the mouth or on the lips.
- A pregnant woman with syphilis can pass it to her fetus.

## What are the symptoms of syphilis?

- Most people with syphilis *never notice any symptoms*.
- When symptoms *do* occur, they may include painless, open sores called chancres (pronounced “shankers”) on the penis, the anus, inside or outside the vagina, on the mouth or lips, or on any skin exposed during sex.
- Later symptoms may include rough, red or reddish brown rashes (especially on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet), patchy hair loss, fever, swollen lymph glands, weight loss, muscle aches and fatigue.
- Symptoms eventually disappear, even without treatment. *But syphilis must be treated*, or it stays in the body.

## How do I know if I have syphilis?

- Ask your doctor for a blood test. (Most people don’t have symptoms.)
- If you have a sore or a rash, your doctor may also collect a sample of fluid and have it tested for syphilis at a laboratory.

## How is syphilis treated? Can I get it again?

- Antibiotics can cure syphilis, often in one dose.
- You can get syphilis again after treatment if you are exposed to it again.

## What if I don’t get treated?

- *If you don’t get treated, syphilis stays in the body.* Years later, it can seriously damage the heart, brain and nervous system. Untreated syphilis can eventually kill you.
- Syphilis also increases your chance of getting or spreading HIV. If you think you were exposed to syphilis, get tested and treated right away!



(Next page)

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## Syphilis, *Continued*

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### Do my sex partners have to be treated?

- Absolutely! If you have syphilis, tell everyone you've had sex with over the past year so they can be examined and treated.
- *Take all your medication as directed and don't have sex until your treatment is complete.*

### What if I'm pregnant?

- If left untreated, syphilis in pregnancy can cause severe problems for the newborn, including mental retardation, blindness, deformities and even death.
- All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis and other STDs, including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. Women who are infected should be treated immediately and tested again throughout their pregnancy.

### Protect yourself against syphilis and other STDs.

- Latex condoms can protect against syphilis, but only if the condom covers the sore.
- Not having sex is the surest way to protect against syphilis and other STDs.
- You can also protect against STDs by having sex with just one partner who only has sex with you. *But you must be SURE that neither one of you is infected.*

### Other ways to reduce the risk of STDs:

- **Limit your sex partners.** The more you have, the higher your risk.
- **ALWAYS use a latex condom** for vaginal, anal and oral sex.
  - Latex condoms can prevent HIV and other STDs.
  - Condoms made of "natural" materials such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy but *not* against STDs.
  - Allergic to latex? Use polyurethane condoms.
- **Be careful with alcohol.** Drinking or getting high makes it harder to remember to use condoms. For help with substance abuse, call 1-800-LifeNet (1-800-543-3638) or call 311 and ask for LifeNet.
- **Ask your doctor about circumcision.** It may help protect men against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

### More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department STD clinics. *HIV results are available in less than an hour.*

Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required, even for people under 18. Call 311 for hours and locations, or visit [nyc.gov/health/std](http://nyc.gov/health/std).