

Syphilis

Treponema Pallidum

For the Health Care Professional



Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by bacteria, can be cured with penicillin or other antibiotics and greatly increases the likelihood of getting HIV. Syphilis is a reportable disease and therefore must be reported to the local health department where the patient lives. Under Wisconsin law, BOTH the laboratory and the health care provider who ordered the test must report cases of Syphilis to the health department.



How is it spread and who gets syphilis?

- ▶ In 2018 there were over 500 cases of syphilis in the State of Wisconsin. Gay and bisexual men have the highest rates of syphilis infection. The most common sign of primary syphilis infection is an ulcer called a chancre, which can be located on the penis, vagina, or any body part involved in sexual contact. Providers should ask patients specific questions about their sex practices in order to understand their risk for infection. Questions such as: “How often are you having vaginal, anal and/or oral sex?” or “When was the last time you had sex with a man, woman or transgender person?” can elicit more information than questions such as: “Do you have vaginal, anal or oral sex?”. Because there are times pregnant women may have syphilis, it is vital pregnant women get at least tested in the first trimester and at delivery.
- ▶ **Language for the patient:** *Syphilis is spread by touching a chancre which is a small painless sore that is on the penis or in the vagina, rectum or mouth. Babies can get syphilis during pregnancy if the mother has it as well. If you have sex, you can get syphilis; however, there are groups of people more likely to get syphilis:*
 - Men who have sex with other men.
 - People living with HIV.
 - People with a sex partner who has an STD, more than one sex partner and/or a new sex partner.



What are the signs and symptoms?

- ▶ Syphilis can go through several stages. The first stage is primary syphilis and will occur about three weeks after infection, but can be as long as three months. Primary syphilis is characterized by a small painless sore called a chancre which lasts about three weeks. After the chancre heals a person may go into the second stage called Secondary syphilis. Secondary syphilis is characterized by a rash which may look like other rashes such as chicken pox. The rash lasts about four weeks. Some people may not go through these stages, not realize they have symptoms or dismiss symptoms as something else. Other syphilis symptoms can include neurological symptoms including those affecting the eyes and other parts of the body as well.
- ▶ **Language for the patient:** *Many people have NO symptoms of syphilis, but find out when they get tested. A person may get a small painless sore called a chancre which is on the penis or in the vagina, rectum or mouth. This will last about three weeks and heal. Then a person may get a rash, which looks like other rashes and can last about four weeks.*



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What are the testing and treatment options?

- ▶ Syphilis is diagnosed with a random blood test. Contact your laboratory for what method of testing is used for your facility. People at high risk for acquiring syphilis are men who like having sex with other men and people living with HIV. It is important they receive an annual syphilis test even if they are unlikely to have syphilis at the present time. One of the ways to diagnose early syphilis is to have a negative syphilis test in the last year which can only be done if a person has a negative test performed. The preferred treatment for syphilis is 2.4mu of Benzathine PCN G IM for early syphilis and the same dose once a week for three weeks for late or unknown duration syphilis. Pregnant women must have PCN and if allergic, be desensitized to PCN and given the correct treatment. The alternative is 14 days of 100mg doxycycline BID for early syphilis and 28 days for late or unknown duration syphilis. This is not preferred unless the patient can have direct observed therapy.
- ▶ **Language for the patient:** *You can get tested for syphilis at a doctor's office, family planning clinic and an STD clinic. Getting tested and treated early can prevent problems and stop the spread of syphilis. If you have syphilis, get your most recent sex partners of the past three months tested AND treated. They may not have symptoms or test positive but still have syphilis. If you have sex with same partner, you can get infected again unless they get tested and treated.*

You can get treated with penicillin or doxycycline. The longer you have syphilis the more treatment you may need. If left untreated, the damage syphilis can cause includes: a loss of eyesight or hearing, damage to your heart and other organs, lead to mental illness and even kill you. Pregnant women with untreated syphilis can have a miscarriage or a stillbirth.



How can your patient prevent getting syphilis?

- ▶ Partner Services is a valuable service for the prevention of repeat infection in patients. The primary purpose of Partner Services is to ensure the spread of STDs is contained by contacting the sexual partners of patients and ensuring those partners are tested and/or treated based on confidential conversations with the patient. Partner Services can also assist health care professionals a number of ways when dealing with the treatment and/or further testing of the patient. Almost all syphilis cases have partner services available to patients. Below are messages health care professionals can use to help prevent future infection.
- ▶ **Language for the patient:** *There are many ways to prevent getting syphilis and it's as easy as ABC:*
 - Avoid having sex until you feel prepared to protect yourself. For instance;*
 - Be monogamous or have sex with just one person who only has sex with you and doesn't have any STDs.*
 - You can find out if both of you have an STD like syphilis by getting tested together.*
 - Condoms can protect you from getting syphilis but only when they cover the body parts that are in contact. If you are not using condoms for oral sex, you can still get syphilis.*

