

Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause serious health problems without treatment. Syphilis is spread by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Syphilis can also spread from a mother with syphilis to her unborn baby.

It may not be obvious that a sex partner has syphilis because sores can be hidden from view due to the nature of their location. If you are sexually active, you can lower your chance of acquiring syphilis 1) by being in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has tested negative for syphilis or 2) by using condoms every time that you have sex.

You should get tested for syphilis and other STIs if you are sexually active with any new partner(s) and/or if you are pregnant. FPA providers use a blood draw to test for syphilis. Certain groups are at higher risk of syphilis such as gay or bisexual men, HIV + individuals, those taking Truvada, and/or individuals with a partner who has tested positive for syphilis.

There are four stages of syphilis, and each stage has different signs and symptoms. Signs and symptoms of primary syphilis include a single (or multiple), painless sore on the penis, vagina, anus, rectum, or mouth. In secondary syphilis, rashes and/or sores may develop in your mouth, vagina, anus, and palms/bottoms of your feet. Some experience fever, swollen lymph glands, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. Others do not notice symptoms of syphilis at all.

Even after your symptoms resolve, you must still receive treatment to stop your syphilis infection, or your infection will move to latent (and sometimes to tertiary) syphilis. Latent syphilis has no visible signs or symptoms. Without treatment, syphilis may stay in your body for years. When individuals advance to tertiary syphilis, the disease damages the internal organs (heart, brain, and nervous system) and may result in death.

Syphilis is curable with the right antibiotics from your healthcare provider but may not undo any damage the infection can cause. If you test positive for syphilis, your provider will counsel you on your results and send a 14 or 28-day regimen of Doxycycline to your pharmacy. Your infection will also be reported to the Public Health Department who will follow-up with you. Certain groups are not eligible for treatment through FPA (including pregnant or HIV + individuals) and will need to visit the local Public Health Department for treatment.

If you are treated at FPA, you will typically need to return in 6 months to monitor your blood work and to make sure that your treatment was successful, and you should be tested at least yearly after that. Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again, and even after successful treatment, you can re-infect yourself with syphilis.

It is important that your partner is tested and treated for syphilis. Did you know that your partner can schedule to be seen at FPA for syphilis testing and treatment? Even after treatment, you could get syphilis again if your sex partner(s) does not receive the appropriate care.

If you are sexually active, have an honest and open talk with your healthcare provider. Ask them if you should get tested for syphilis or other STDs.