



Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

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Syphilis & MSM (Men Who Have Sex With Men) – CDC Fact Sheet



Once nearly eliminated in the U.S., syphilis is increasing, especially among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). This fact sheet answers general questions about syphilis and MSM.

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause serious health problems if it is not treated. Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary), and there are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage.

Should I be concerned about syphilis?

Most cases of syphilis in the United States are among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Syphilis also has increased nearly every year among MSM, for about two decades. If syphilis is not treated, it can cause serious health problems, including neuralgic (brain and nerve) problems, eye problems, and even blindness. In addition, syphilis is linked to an increased risk of transmission of HIV infection.

How could I get syphilis?

Any sexually active person can get syphilis. Syphilis can be transmitted during anal sex and oral sex, as well as vaginal sex. Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. In men, sores can occur on or around the penis, around the anus, or in the rectum, or in or around the mouth. These sores can be painless, so it is possible to have them and not notice them. Correct use of condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis if the condom covers the sores. However, sometimes sores occur in areas not covered by a condom. It is still possible to get syphilis from contact with these sores. You cannot get syphilis through casual contact with objects such as toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.

What does syphilis look like?

Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary), and there are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage. A person with **primary syphilis** generally has a sore or sores at the original site of infection. These sores usually occur on or around the genitals, around the anus or in the rectum, or in or around the mouth. These sores are usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless. Symptoms of **secondary syphilis** include skin rash, swollen lymph nodes, and fever. The signs and symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis can be mild, and they might not be noticed. During the latent stage, there are no signs or symptoms. **Tertiary syphilis** is associated with severe medical problems and is usually diagnosed by a doctor with the help of multiple tests. It can affect the heart, brain, and other organs of the body.

A detailed description of each stage of syphilis can be found on [CDC's syphilis fact sheet](#).

How common is syphilis among MSM?

Between 2020 and 2021, the number of reported primary and secondary (P&S) cases increased by 29% in the United States. There were 53,767 P&S syphilis cases reported in 2021. Most (36%) of these cases were among MSM only and men who have sex with both men and women.

How can I reduce my risk of getting syphilis?

The only way to avoid getting syphilis or other STDs is to not have anal, oral, or vaginal sex.

If you are sexually active, doing the following things will lower your chances of getting syphilis:

- Being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested for syphilis and does not have syphilis
- Using latex condoms [the right way](#) every time you have sex. Condoms prevent the spread of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. Sometimes sores can occur in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.

How do I know if I have syphilis?

The only way to know is by getting tested. Many men who get syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, yet they remain at risk for health problems if they are not treated. Additionally, the painless sores that show up during the early stages of syphilis often go unrecognized by the person who has them. Individuals who are unaware of their infection can spread it to their sex partners.

How will my doctor know if I have syphilis?

Have an honest and open talk with your healthcare provider about your sexual history and ask whether you should be tested for syphilis or other STDs. Your doctor can do a blood test to determine if you have syphilis. Sometimes, healthcare providers will diagnose syphilis by testing fluid from a syphilis sore. If you are a sexually active man who has sex with men, who is living with HIV, and/or who has partner(s) who have tested positive for HIV or syphilis, you should get tested regularly for syphilis.

What is the link between syphilis and HIV?

In the United States, approximately half of MSM with primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis were also living with HIV. In addition, MSM who are HIV-negative and diagnosed with P&S syphilis are more likely to be infected with HIV in the future. Having a sore or break in the skin from an STD such as syphilis may allow HIV to more easily enter your body. You may also be more likely to get HIV because the same behaviors and circumstances that put you at risk for getting other STDs can also put you at greater risk for getting HIV.

Can syphilis be cured?

Yes, syphilis can be cured with the right medicine from your healthcare provider. However, treatment might not undo damage that the infection has already done.

I've been treated. Can I get syphilis again?

Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Even after you've been successfully treated, you can still be reinfected. Only laboratory tests can confirm whether you have syphilis. Follow-up testing by your healthcare provider is recommended to make sure that your treatment was successful.

Because syphilis sores can be painless and hidden in the vagina, anus, under the foreskin of the penis, or in the mouth, it may not be obvious that a sex partner has syphilis. Unless you know that all of your sex partner(s) have been tested and treated, you may be at risk of getting syphilis again from an infected partner.

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