

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can affect people of all genders and ages. It develops in stages and can cause serious health problems if left untreated.

How syphilis spreads

- Syphilis is passed through vaginal, anal, or oral sex, and sometimes through close genital contact with someone who has syphilis.
- It can also spread from a pregnant parent to their baby during pregnancy or childbirth (this is called congenital syphilis).
- Syphilis can affect multiple parts of the body, including the genitals, mouth, anus, and other organs if left untreated. It can also involve the central nervous system, eyes, or ears at any stage of infection. Untreated or inadequately treated syphilis increases the risk of these complications.

Get tested

- Testing is done through a simple blood test and, in some cases, a swab of sores.
- Because signs of syphilis, such as a sore, can sometimes occur internally (genitals or rectum), it may also be necessary for your provider to perform a physical examination.
- Illinois requires health care providers to screen pregnant patients for syphilis at the first prenatal visit and again during the third trimester.
- Regular screening is recommended for those with new or multiple partners, pregnant individuals, or anyone exposed to syphilis.
- Regular screening is recommended, especially for sexually active people under age 25 or anyone with new or multiple partners.



Get treated

- Syphilis is treated with antibiotics (typically penicillin).
- Early treatment is highly effective, but past damage cannot be reversed.
- All recent sexual partners should be tested and treated to prevent reinfection.

Why treatment matters

- Untreated or inadequately treated syphilis can cause permanent organ damage, neurological problems, heart disease, and death.
- Treating syphilis early prevents long-term health issues and stops the spread to partners and babies during pregnancy.

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ABOUT SYPHILIS



Cook County DEPT. of
Public Health

A division of Cook County Health

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Stages and symptoms

It is possible that you will not notice or have symptoms. This is called being asymptomatic.

1st Stage: Primary syphilis

- Symptoms appear 1–12 weeks after exposure.
- A painless sore (called a chancre) develops on the genitals, mouth, or anus. A chancre may appear internally in the genitals, which could be missed during testing.
- The sore lasts 2–6 weeks and heals on its own, but the infection remains in the body.
- This is one of the most infectious and transmissible stages of syphilis.

2nd Stage: Secondary syphilis

- A rash can appear anywhere on the body. It is usually not itchy. Some people may also develop mouth sores at this stage.
- Flu-like symptoms such as fever, swollen lymph nodes, or fatigue may occur.
- The rash and flu-like symptoms may go away, but syphilis is still present.
- This is one of the most infectious and transmissible stages of syphilis.

Latent and late Stages

- Without treatment or when treatment is not adequate, syphilis can enter a long, hidden phase (latent). It is less likely for syphilis to be spread to sexual partners in this stage, but can lead to long-term health complications.
- If untreated, it can cause severe damage to the heart, brain, nerves, and other organs.
- Late-stage syphilis can lead to blindness, paralysis, dementia, and death.

**Having
an STI
does not
define
who you
are.**

*Getting tested and
treated are a normal
part of health care.*



About congenital syphilis

- If syphilis is untreated or inadequately treated during pregnancy, it can pass to the baby before birth.
- It can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, or severe, life-threatening infections in the newborn.
- Babies with congenital syphilis may experience bone deformities, anemia, enlarged liver and spleen, brain and nerve problems, and developmental delays.
- Early prenatal testing and treatment, in addition to testing the newborn after delivery, are essential to protect both parent and baby.

Protect yourself and others

- Use condoms or dental dams during vaginal, anal, and oral sex.
- Get tested regularly and encourage partners to do the same.
- Talk openly with partners and your doctor about STI prevention—it's part of healthy communication.
- Ask your doctor about additional protection and prevention options, such as expedited partner therapy (EPT), Doxy PEP, PrEP, or PEP, which can help reduce the risk of some infections, including HIV.
- Avoid sexual contact until you and your partner(s) have completed treatment.

Follow-up for reportable STIs

Most STI infections, including syphilis, are reportable infections. This means it's likely that health department staff will reach out to you if your test results are positive. They do this to:

- Ensure you've been treated appropriately
- Provide you with complete information
- Collect a brief sexual history and possible exposure timeline
- Help stop the spread of infection in the community

Your personal information is protected under HIPAA regulations, and everything you share is completely confidential.