What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria Treponema pallidum.

How do you get syphilis?

It is passed on via unprotected sex (sex without a condom) and by sharing sex toys.

Safer sex is the best way to prevent syphilis. This means using a condom every time you have sex (vaginal, anal or oral). Use a dental dam for contact with your partner's vagina or anus during oral sex. Any sex toys should be covered with a condom and washed after use. Remember to switch condoms between partners.1

If you are worried about syphilis (and other STIs), or have had unprotected sex, make sure to get tested.
What do syphilis symptoms look like?

The first symptoms of syphilis can take 10 days to 3 weeks to appear after infection. The most common symptom is a painless sore that appears where the virus was transmitted - normally on the penis, vagina or anus. Your lymph glands (in the neck, groin or armpit) may also swell.

The sore will disappear in 2-6 weeks. However, if the infection itself is not treated, it will move to the second stage.2

You can't diagnose syphilis by looking at pictures because symptoms vary from person to person. If you think you have syphilis, see your doctor or healthcare worker as soon as possible.

Symptoms of secondary syphilis begin a few weeks after the disappearance of the sore and include:

- a non-itchy skin rash
- small skin growths on the vulva (in women) and around the anus (in both men and women)
- flu-like symptoms such as tiredness, headaches, joint pains and fever
- swollen lymph glands
- weight loss
- hair loss.

These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks, or come and go over a period of months.3

Without treatment, syphilis becomes 'latent' whereby you do not experience any symptoms even though you remain infected. This stage can happen for years, even decades and there is a danger of moving onto the most dangerous stage - tertiary syphilis.

A third of people who are not treated for syphilis develop serious symptoms at this stage including:

- stroke
- dementia
- loss of co-ordination
- numbness
- paralysis
- blindness
- deafness
- heart disease
- skin rashes.

At this stage, syphilis can also cause death.4

This is why it is important to see a healthcare professional and get tested and treated in the early stages of syphilis.

Can I get tested for syphilis?

Yes. Your doctor or healthcare worker will perform a physical examination of the genital area, your mouth and throat, and may also check for rashes or growths.
Afterwards, you will have a blood test. If you have sores, a swab will also be taken. You may also be tested for other STIs.

Results should come back in 7-10 days.5

How is syphilis treated?

Caught early, syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. A single dose of penicillin is very effective in the early stages and fairly effective in the later stages. If you are allergic to penicillin, you will probably be given azithromycin or doxycycline instead.

Regardless of the treatment, you'll need to have regular blood tests for at least a year after treatment.6

Avoid having sex until the sores have healed. Any current or recent sexual partners should also be tested and treated.

What happens if I don't get treatment for syphilis?

Without treatment, syphilis can lead to serious health issues, particularly in the later stages such as stroke, meningitis, deafness, visual problems and dementia.

- Small bumps or tumours

In the late stage of syphilis, bumps can develop on your skin, bones, liver and other organs. These can disappear with antibiotics.

- Cardiovascular problems

These may include an aneurysm (a bulge in a blood vessel) and inflammation of the aorta — your body's major artery — and other blood vessels. It may also damage the heart valves.

- HIV and syphilis

A syphilis sore can bleed easily, providing an easy way for HIV to enter your bloodstream during sex.

- Issues during pregnancy

If you're pregnant, you can pass syphilis to your baby. If left untreated, it also greatly increases the risk of miscarriage and stillbirth.7

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1. NHS Choices 'Syphilis - Prevention' [accessed 27 October 2015]
2. NHS Choices 'Syphilis - Symptoms' [accessed 27 October 2015]
3. NHS Choices 'Syphilis - Symptoms' [accessed 27 October 2015]
4. NHS Choices 'Syphilis - Symptoms' [accessed 27 October 2015]
5. NHS Choices 'Syphilis - Diagnosis' [accessed 27 October 2015]
6. WebMD 'Understanding Syphilis - Diagnosis and Treatment' [accessed 27 October 2015]
7. Mayo Clinic 'Syphilis - Complications' [accessed 27 October 2015]

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