Fact Sheet
Syphilis

WHAT IS SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis was nearly eradicated in 2000 but since then Long Beach has seen a steady increase. Historically, rates have been highest men who have sex with men, however, we are seeing rates increase in women as well. Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. If left untreated, syphilis can cause permanent damage to the heart, brain, and other organs. Having syphilis can increase your chances of transmitting or acquiring HIV.

WHO GETS SYPHILIS INFECTIONS?

Syphilis can be passed during vaginal, anal, oral sex, or skin-to-skin contact with someone who has a syphilis infection. Pregnant people with syphilis can pass it to their unborn child during pregnancy.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is a disease of stages. Each stage is characterized by different symptoms. These symptoms come and go, but unless syphilis is treated and cured, it will remain in the body and can cause serious damage over time. The stages are:

- **Primary Syphilis:** A painless sore (or sores) called a chancre appears on, around, or inside the penis, vagina, mouth, or anus. The chancre appears 10-90 days after exposure. The sore is full of bacteria and is very infectious. Many people never notice the chancre because it is painless and may be inside the vagina or somewhere less visible. Chancres generally last 2-5 weeks and can disappear on their own.
- **Secondary Syphilis:** A few weeks after the chancres disappear, a rash may appear on the body, hands, and/or soles of your feet.
- **Early Latent:** Usually no symptoms and less likely to transmit to sex partner. A subcategory of latent syphilis. When the initial infection has occurred within the previous 12 months.
- **Latent Syphilis:** Symptoms usually disappear on their own and the person is less likely to transmit to sex partners. However, the disease is still in the body and can cause serious complications.

LONG BEACH HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

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HOW IS SYPHILIS TREATED?

Syphilis can be easily treated and cured with certain antibiotics, given as an injection or oral pill. Make sure both you and your sex partner(s) complete treatment before having sex again. You should not attempt to diagnose yourself or take medicine on your own.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF SYPHILIS?

If left untreated, syphilis can affect the heart, brain and other organs. Damage becomes apparent in the final stage of syphilis, known as tertiary or late syphilis. This stage often occurs decades (10 years or more) after infection. Complications can include damage to the skin, bones and internal organs; neural problems including swelling of the brain, blindness, seizures, and insanity; and damage to blood vessels and the heart. These complications can lead to death. A baby born with syphilis can result in stillbirth or birth defects.

HOW CAN SYPHILIS INFECTIOUS BE PREVENTED?

Latex, polyurethane, and **internal condoms** offer some protection against syphilis, but may not cover all infectious areas. Infected pregnant people should seek prenatal care early and should be tested for syphilis during the first trimester. If syphilis is detected and treated early, pregnant person can prevent a stillbirth or birth defects to the baby.

RESOURCES

Long Beach Health Department

California Department of Public Health

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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