

## Positive, Now What?

### What Is Syphilis?

Syphilis is an STD that can infect both men and women. You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal or oral sex. This sore is routinely called a chancre. Sores can be found on the penis, vagina, anus, in the rectum, or on the lips and in the mouth. Syphilis can also be spread from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

### What Does Having Syphilis Mean for My Health?

Syphilis has been called "the great imitator" because it has so many possible symptoms, many of which look like symptoms from other diseases. During the first (primary) stage of syphilis, you may notice one to several firm, round and painless sores. The sore is the location where syphilis entered your body, and it may be confused for an ingrown hair or zipper cut. The sore lasts three to six weeks and heals regardless of whether or not you receive treatment. Even though the sore goes away, you must still receive treatment so your infection does not move to the secondary stage.

During the secondary stage, you may have skin rashes or sores in your mouth, vagina or anus. The rash can look like faint, rough, reddish brown spots on the palms of your hands or the bottoms of your feet. Other symptoms can include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches and fatigue. The symptoms from this stage will go away whether or not you receive treatment. However, if you do not receive treatment, your infection will move to the latent and possibly late stage of syphilis. This is a serious condition without signs and symptoms and would occur 10 to 30 years after your infection began. When medication is taken properly, it will stop the infection and could decrease your chances of having complications. If you have syphilis, you want to ensure that you don't have other STDs as well. All persons who have syphilis should be tested for HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhea.

### What are the First Steps I Should Take to Manage My Infection?

If you are positive for syphilis, you should visit with your doctor or health care provider to discuss treatment of you and your sexual partners as well as additional testing you may need.

### How Do I Find a Doctor?

Many different types of health care providers offer treatment for syphilis. The health care provider that tested you will be able to provide you with treatment for your syphilis infection. Additional providers can be found at this website: [www.ndhealth.gov/STD/FindProvider](http://www.ndhealth.gov/STD/FindProvider).

### Is There a Cure for Syphilis?

Yes, syphilis can be cured with the right antibiotics from your health care provider. However, treatment will not undo any damage that the infection has already caused.

### How Is Syphilis Treated?

A single dose of an antibiotic will cure a person who has primary, secondary or early latent syphilis. Three doses of the same antibiotic at weekly intervals are recommended for individuals with late latent syphilis or latent syphilis of unknown duration. Treatment will kill the syphilis organism and prevent further damage, but it will not repair damage already done. You should not have sex with any partner(s) until the syphilis sores are completely healed. Visit your health care provider for re-evaluation at six and 12 months after treatment.

### What Happens If I Don't Get Treated?

Syphilis can have very serious complications when left untreated as the bacteria remain in the body until treatment is provided. Without treatment, syphilis can spread to the brain and nervous system or to the eye. Some of the symptoms may include severe headache, difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, blindness and dementia.

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### How Can I Protect Myself and Others?

The only way to avoid STDs is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. If you are sexually active, being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has negative STD test results and using latex condoms the right way every time you have sex are the best ways to protect yourself. Condoms prevent transmission of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. However, sometimes sores occur in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.

You should get tested regularly for syphilis if you are pregnant, are a man who has sex with men, have HIV infection, and/or have partner(s) who have tested positive for syphilis.

### I'm Pregnant. How Does Syphilis Affect My Baby?

If you are pregnant and have syphilis, you can give the infection to your unborn baby. Having syphilis can lead to a low birth weight baby. It can also make it more likely you will deliver your baby too early or stillborn (a baby born dead). To protect your baby, you should be tested for syphilis at least once during your pregnancy and receive immediate treatment if you test positive. An infected baby may be born without signs or symptoms of disease. However, if not treated immediately, the baby may develop serious problems within a few weeks. Untreated babies can have health problems such as cataracts, deafness or seizures, and they can die.

### Does This Mean I Am Immune to Syphilis?

No, reinfection is possible. Yearly screenings are recommended for men who have sex with men and sexually active HIV positive persons. If you have a sex partner that is not treated for syphilis, it is likely you will be infected again, even if you took your treatment correctly.

### Do I Need to Be Excluded from Work, Child Care, School or Other Activities?

No. Since syphilis is transmitted through sexual contact only, exclusion is not necessary.

### Who Do I Need to Tell About My Infection?

You should tell your current sexual partners and all sexual partners that you have had in the last three months so they can be tested and treated for syphilis. It may be awkward, but telling partners about STDs is the right thing to do.

### How Do I Tell Others?

Being diagnosed with an STD while in a relationship can bring up lots of emotions. You may question your trust in your partner. Your partner may be upset, even angry, and that can be hard to deal with. Before blaming your partner for infidelity, keep in mind that some STDs don't always show up right away. It's possible that you or your partner got the STD in a previous relationship without even knowing it. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your partner's concerns and fears and offer information about the STD and its symptoms. Give your partner time to take in the information. The most important thing to remember is that you and your partner both need to get medical care as soon as possible. If you and your partner have already had sex, stop having sex until you can both get tested. Talk to a doctor. You will probably need to take medicine as part of your treatment. Take all the medicine exactly as your doctor prescribes.

The North Dakota Department of Health can contact your partners without releasing your information to notify them that they have been exposed to an STD and provide information on how to get tested. Your health care provider may be able to help you notify your sexual partners as well. There are also anonymous partner notification tools such as <https://dontspreadit.com> or [www.inspot.org](http://www.inspot.org) that can notify your partners through email or text message. It may be awkward, but telling partners about STDs is the right thing to do.

### Additional Information

[www.ndhealth.gov/STD](http://www.ndhealth.gov/STD)

North Dakota Department of Health: 800.472.2180

[www.cdc.gov/STD](http://www.cdc.gov/STD)