



Major Complications and Prevention Methods of Syphilis

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DESCRIPTION

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, subspecies *pallidum*. The signs and symptoms of syphilis vary according to the four stages in which syphilis occurs: primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary. In the early stages, it classically presents as a single chancre (a hard, painless, nonpruritic sore on the skin that is usually 1 to 2 cm in diameter), although multiple sores may be present. Secondary syphilis causes a diffuse rash that often affects the palms and soles of the feet. It may also cause sores on the mouth and vagina. Latent syphilis that lasts for years has few or no symptoms. In tertiary syphilis, there are gums (soft, benign growths), neurological problems, or heart symptoms. Syphilis is known as the "great mimic" because it can cause symptoms similar to many other diseases.

Syphilis is most commonly transmitted sexually. It can also be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy or childbirth, causing congenital syphilis. Other diseases caused by *Treponema* fungi include yambedia (*T. pallidum* subspecies *pertenue*), pinta (*T. carateum*), and nonvenereal syphilis (*T. pallidum* subspecies *Endemicum*). These three diseases are usually not sexually transmitted. Diagnosis is usually made with blood tests. Bacteria can also be detected by dark field microscopy.

Doctors classify the stages of syphilis as either primary, secondary, latent, or tertiary. Different symptoms define each stage. The disease can be transmitted in primary and secondary stages and in some cases during an early latent period. It is contagious when there are open lesions or sores. Tertiary syphilis is not contagious but has the most severe symptoms.

Symptoms of primary syphilis include one or more painless, hard, round syphilitic ulcers or chancres. These appear 10 days to 3 months after the bacteria enter the body. The chancre resolves within 2 to 6 weeks. However, without treatment, the bacteria can remain in the body.

Without treatment, syphilis can progress to the second stage. This includes more serious symptoms such as:

- A non-itchy, rough, rash
- Gray or white lesions
- Muscle aches
- Fever
- A sore throat
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Patchy hair loss
- Headaches
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fatigue

These symptoms may disappear weeks after they first appear. It can also return multiple times over an extended period of time. Untreated, secondary syphilis can progress to latent and tertiary stages.

Less commonly, syphilis can be spread by direct contact with active lesions. It can also be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy or childbirth. Syphilis is not spread from using the same toilet, bath, clothing, or utensils, or from doorknobs, swimming pools, or hot tubs. Syphilis is curable with prompt diagnosis and treatment. However, if treated too late, it can cause permanent damage to the heart and brain even after the infection has healed.

If we have syphilis for less than a year, a single dose of penicillin is usually enough to kill the infection. If people are allergic to penicillin, another antibiotic such as doxycycline may be given instead. If we are in the later stages of the disease, we need higher doses. If a person is a pregnant and allergic to penicillin, her doctor may perform a procedure called desensitization that allows her to safely take the drug.

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