

## What is Syphilis?

[Syphilis](#) is a sexually transmitted infection that can cause serious health problems if it is not treated. Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). There are different signs and symptoms associated with each stage. Syphilis rates are rising nationwide with especially high rates in the Bay area, including the city of Berkeley.

## How is Syphilis spread?

You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. You can find sores on or around the penis, vagina, or anus, or in the rectum, on the lips, or in the mouth. Syphilis can spread from [an infected mother to her unborn baby](#).

## What does Syphilis look like?

Syphilis is divided into stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary), with different signs and symptoms associated with each stage.

A person with **primary syphilis** generally has a sore or sores at the original site of infection. These sores usually occur on or around the genitals, around the anus or in the rectum, or in or around the mouth. These sores are usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless.

Symptoms of **secondary syphilis** include skin rash, swollen lymph nodes, and fever. The signs and symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis can be mild, and they might not be noticed.

During the **latent stage**, there are no signs or symptoms.

**Tertiary syphilis** is associated with severe medical problems. A healthcare provider can usually diagnose tertiary syphilis with the help of multiple tests. It can affect the heart, brain, and other organs of the body.

## How can I reduce my risk of getting syphilis?

If you are sexually active, you can do the following things to lower your chances of getting syphilis:

- Using condoms [the right way](#) every time you have sex. Condoms prevent transmission of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. Sometimes sores occur in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.

We recommend talking with all partners about safer sex behaviors and risk before you engage in sex. An easy phrase to use with a potential new partner is ..... “Sexual health is important to me, yours and mine, I have a few questions before we do anything: have you been tested for syphilis? What were the results? Have you had unprotected sex since being tested/completing treatment?”

## Should I be tested for syphilis?

**Any sexually active person** can get syphilis through unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Have an honest and open talk with your healthcare provider and ask whether you should be tested for syphilis or other STDs.

- We recommend all sexually active individuals who are at risk for sexually transmitted infections be tested for syphilis because of the rising rates in our community.

How will I or my clinician know if I have syphilis?

Most of the time, a blood test is used to test for syphilis. Some health care providers will diagnose syphilis by testing fluid from a syphilis sore.

## Treatment

Syphilis can be cured with the right antibiotics, usually with one or more injections of penicillin. The dose that you'll need is determined by your stage of syphilis at the time of your diagnosis.

Please be aware that your syphilis test will need to be repeated once more on the day that you come into the clinic for treatment.

## I've been treated for syphilis. Now what?

- **What do I tell my partners?**

Anyone that you've had sex with in the past 90 days should be informed that they've been exposed to syphilis, so that they can be treated and tested for syphilis themselves. Please also abstain from sex completely for the next 7 days after treatment.

- **Do I need to be tested again?**

**Yes!** Your UHS clinician will order follow-up blood tests for syphilis, to be repeated at 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year after your initial treatment. These tests are important to ensure that the antibiotic worked to clear your body of the infection.

If you were initially diagnosed and treated for syphilis by another clinic (outside Tang), please either bring your lab results and treatment notes to your visit, or contact Medical Records (located on the 2nd floor of Tang) in order to allow us to request these records on your behalf, so that your UHS clinician can correctly interpret your follow-up test results and provide the care that you need.

- **Can I be infected with syphilis again?**

**Yes!** Being treated for syphilis once doesn't protect you from being infected again. For this reason, it's critical to come in for all of your recommended follow-up tests (so that your clinician can accurately identify if you've been infected again), to make sure all of your partners have been tested and treated for syphilis, and to use condoms, dental dams, or other barrier methods consistently with all sexual contact in the future to reduce your risk of being exposed again.

## I just found out that I'm pregnant. Should I be tested for syphilis?

**Yes!** If you're infected with syphilis during pregnancy, this infection can be passed on to the baby, and can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, and many possible health problems for the baby. These risks can be reduced by testing for syphilis - and treating right away if your test is positive - as early as possible during your pregnancy.

## Syphilis Testing @ UHS

Current students can get tested for Syphilis at the Tang Center in two different ways:

- If you're currently experiencing possible symptoms of syphilis, have recently been exposed to syphilis, or wish to discuss syphilis testing in more detail, please schedule a **Primary Care Appointment** (through eTang, or by calling our Appointment Line at 510-642-2000).
- If you don't have any symptoms and haven't been exposed to syphilis, you can request **Self-Directed Testing** for syphilis (and other STIs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV) without a primary care appointment through the eTang portal.

## Additional Resources at Tang:

**Sexpert Education Clinic**, schedule a FREE 25-minute session with a trained peer Sexpert to discuss STI prevention and safer sex. Appointments available Fridays, 12-3 pm via eTang, or by calling our Appointment Line at 510-642-2000. Stop by the Health Promotion office during drop-in hours Monday - Thursday, 2-3 pm, to help navigate STI self-directed services.

**Healthy Sexuality Coaching**, schedule a FREE 45-minute coaching session with a professional sexual health educator who will help you understand recent diagnosis, communicate diagnosis to partner(s) and more. Appointments available via eTang, or by calling our Appointment Line at 510-642-2000.

Check our **Website**: [uhs.berkeley.edu](https://uhs.berkeley.edu) to learn more about this and other medical concerns.  
For **Appointments**: [etang.berkeley.edu](https://etang.berkeley.edu) or call 510-642-2000 For **Advice**: call 510-643-7197