



**FACT SHEET – 12 April 2019**

**SYPHILIS**

**What is syphilis?** Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause long-term health complications if not treated correctly. It is caused by a bacterium (*T. pallidum*) and spreads very easily. You can get syphilis from just one sexual encounter with a person who has it. You can get it from getting or giving oral sex or from vaginal or anal sex.

**How is syphilis spread?** You can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during anal, vaginal, or oral sex. Sores can occur 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 and can result in fetal death. A person who has the early forms of syphilis (called primary or secondary syphilis) is at much greater risk of also getting **HIV**, the virus that causes AIDS. Also - a person who has HIV and syphilis is at much greater risk of spreading their HIV infection to other people.



**What does syphilis look like?** Most people who get syphilis don't even realize it at first – because the “sore” is painless and can be hidden from view in the vagina or rectum. Also, the painless syphilis sore can be confused for an ingrown hair, zipper cut, or other seemingly harmless bump. The sore is the location where syphilis entered your body and usually appears a few weeks after infection. The sore is usually firm, round, and painless. Because the sore is painless, and because it may be inside the anus, throat or vagina, it can easily go unnoticed. The sore lasts 3 to 6 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.



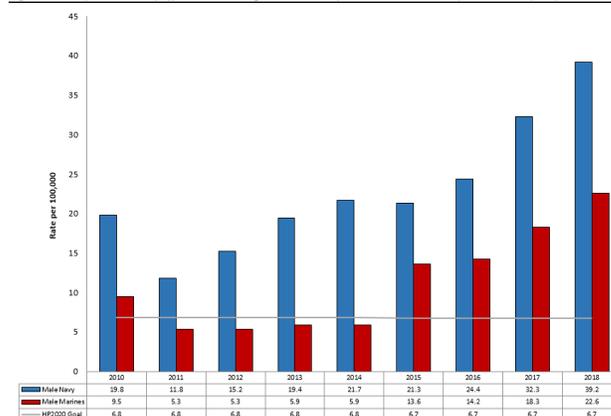
If the primary infection is not treated, you may get a non-itchy body rash on the palms of your hands and soles of your feet, all over your body, or in just a few places. Or, you might notice sores in your mouth, or around the vagina or anus. Other symptoms you may have can include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue (feeling very tired). The symptoms from this stage will go away whether or not you receive treatment. If untreated, these symptoms usually

disappear over time. But - you might continue to have syphilis in your body for years – even without any signs or symptoms. Some people who are not treated get very serious health problems years after the infection began. Symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating your muscle movements, paralysis (not able to move certain parts of your body), numbness, blindness, and dementia (mental disorder). In the late stages of syphilis, the disease damages internal organs and can result in death.

**Do Sailors and Marines get syphilis?** About 140 active duty Sailors and Marines are diagnosed with syphilis every year (about 1 case every other day) and rates have been rising since 2011. Among Sailors and Marines, syphilis is mostly diagnosed in single men aged 20-34. The infections are highest in young black men. Men who have sex with men are at the highest risk for getting syphilis.

- Men who have sex with men should ask their doctor for a syphilis test at once least every year.
- Pregnant women should always be tested for syphilis because the infection can be passed to the newborn.

**Figure 1.** Primary and Secondary Syphilis Rates among Male Active Duty Sailors and Marines Compared to Healthy People 2020 Goal, 2010-2018



Data Source: Disease Reporting System - Internet (DRSI) and Defense Medical Epidemiology Database (DMED).  
Healthy People 2020 Goal (STD-7.2): <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/sexually-transmitted-diseases/objectives>  
Prepared by the EpiData Center Department, Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center on 11 April 2019.



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

The only way to avoid syphilis is to not have vaginal, anal or oral sex. If you are sexually active, you can lower your chances of getting syphilis by:

- Being in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has tested syphilis-free.
- Using latex condoms the right way every time you have sex – oral, anal and vaginal.
  - Have condoms with when and where you think you might need them.
  - Insist on condoms with every partner and every sex act.
  - Put the condom on before any penetration.
  - Roll the condom all the way to the base of the penis.
  - After ejaculation, hold the condom at the base of the penis and withdraw while still erect.
  - Never use oil-based lubricants – like baby oil or Vaseline - with latex condoms.



Just washing your genitals, urinating or douching after sex will not protect you from syphilis.

### Can I tell by looking if a person has syphilis?

Because syphilis sores can be hidden in the vagina, anus, under the foreskin of the penis, or in the mouth, it may not be obvious that a sex partner has syphilis.

### Can syphilis be cured?

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 done.

### I've been treated. Can I get syphilis again?

Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Even after you've been successfully treated, you can still be re-infected. Only laboratory tests can confirm whether you have syphilis. Follow-up testing by your health care provider is recommended to make sure that your treatment was successful.

After you've been treated, it's important to tell your recent sex partners about your infection – right away - because they may have it too. You could even get the infection again from the same partner if they have not been treated.

### Where can I get more information?

CDC - Sexually Transmitted Diseases: <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>

CDC - Syphilis: <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/>

CDC - Syphilis and MSM Fact Sheet: <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/STDFact-MSM-Syphilis.htm>

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

Contact [www.cdc.gov/info](http://www.cdc.gov/info)

NMCPHC – Gay Men's Sexual Health:

<http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/health-promotion/reproductive-sexual-health/Pages/gay-bisexual-mens-health.aspx>

This information was adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center from CDC; Factsheet – Syphilis at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/syphilis-factsheet-july-2014.pdf>, and Wasserheit JN.(1992) Epidemiological synergy. Interrelationships between human immunodeficiency virus infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. Sex Transm Dis. 1992 Mar-Apr;19(2):61-77 [PubMed ID: 1595015] Images of syphilis: CDC. Image of condom: Bedsider.org.

