

# Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. There are records from more than 500 years ago documenting its effects on humans. Prior to the advent of penicillin in the mid-1900s, syphilis caused widespread infection and untold tragedy on a global scale. Nearly eradicated in the United States 15 years ago, it is once again on the rise.

Syphilis initially infects the mucous membranes (genitals, anus/rectum, lips/mouth) but can then spread over months and years to many other body parts. If left untreated syphilis can cause irreversible damage to many areas of the body, including the brain. This is why it is important to be tested for syphilis if you and your clinician determine you may have had an exposure.

## How common is syphilis?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, there were 63,450 new cases of syphilis in the United States in 2014<sup>1</sup>. In Oregon there has been a 1,500-percent rise in new cases of syphilis in the last decade, from 0.7 out of every 100,000 people in 2007 to 10.5 out of every 100,000 people in 2014<sup>2</sup>.

## How common is syphilis at UO?

Syphilis rates appear to be quite low at University of Oregon, but are not zero.

## How could I be exposed to syphilis?

Syphilis is spread by direct contact with the infected sores, most commonly through genital or anal/rectal contact. Though less common, sores in the mouth can also lead to transmission via direct contact with a sexual partner's mouths, genitals, or anus.

## If I have been exposed to syphilis, how long until I might have symptoms?

Syphilis very often goes undetected in its initial stages because symptoms can be so minimal. However, the average time between infection and the first symptoms is 21 days, with a range of 10-90 days.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Syphilis—CDC Fact Sheet (Detailed). <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis-detailed.htm>
2. Oregon Health Authority. Public Health Division. Syphilis in Oregon. <https://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/CommunicableDisease/DiseaseSurveillanceData/STD/Documents/9984-STD-Syphilis-Final.pdf>

## **What are the symptoms of syphilis?**

Early (primary) syphilis appears as a painless sore at the site it enters the body (genitals, anus/rectum, lips/mouth). Very often, this initial sore (called a chancre) is undetected and heals over within three to six weeks. If untreated, the bacteria then spread over weeks and months and can cause secondary syphilis, which is characterized by rashes on the skin (often the hands and feet) as well as fevers, swollen lymph nodes, and other systemic symptoms. Symptoms at this point can be mild or can mimic other diseases and hence be misdiagnosed, giving syphilis the nickname "The Great Pretender." If not treated, syphilis can then progress over years to latent syphilis, late (tertiary) syphilis. In addition, syphilis can invade the brain and nervous system at any point after the initial chancre, leading to neurosyphilis.

## **Is it treatable?**

Yes. If caught in the early stages, syphilis is curable with antibiotics. If untreated, it can advance and cause organ damage that cannot be reversed.

## **How do you test for syphilis?**

We test for syphilis with a blood test.

## **How long after infection will a screening test turn positive?**

Testing one month after infection detects most cases of syphilis. Testing three months after infection detects nearly all cases.

## **How will you notify me of my test results?**

We relay negative results via a secure message to you via myUOHealth student portal.

If you test positive, we will be calling you by phone. If you don't answer, we'll leave a generic message to call us back to discuss your recent test results.

## **What happens if I test positive for syphilis?**

If you test positive, we will add an extra test on to your bloodwork to confirm this is a true positive and not a false positive, which happens at times. Then we will schedule an appointment for you with a UHC clinician as soon as possible. At that visit, you will get all the information you need, have your questions answered, and get treated.