



SYPHILIS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The number of early syphilis cases (primary, secondary, and early latent stages) has continued to rise in Houston/Harris County since 2020. Over the past (4) years, the percentage of cases among women has risen over 56%. This increase has contributed to the rise in congenital syphilis, with the number of cases in 2021 being nine (9) times higher than that in 2016. Houstonians, especially high-burden populations, unborn babies, and infants can be protected by testing and proper treatment for syphilis infections.

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause serious health problems if left untreated. Infection develops in stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). Each stage can have different signs and symptoms.

Who should be tested?

- Pregnant women are required to be tested in the first and third trimester.
- Persons engaging in unprotected sexual contact
- Men who engage in anonymous sex
- Persons with multiple sex partners
- Persons recently diagnosed with any other sexually transmitted disease such as gonorrhea, Chlamydia or HIV.

What are the signs and symptoms of Syphilis?

There are four stages of syphilis (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). Each stage has different signs and symptoms.

Primary Stage

During the first (primary) stage of syphilis, you may notice a single sore or multiple sores. The sore is the location where syphilis entered your body. These sores usually occur in, on, or around the

- penis;
- anus;
- lips or in the mouth.
- vagina;
- rectum; and

Sores are usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless. Because the sore is painless, you may not notice it. The sore usually lasts 3 to 6 weeks and heals regardless of whether you receive treatment.

Even after the sore goes away, you must still receive treatment. This will stop your infection from moving to the secondary stage.

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Secondary Stage

During the secondary stage, you may have skin rashes and/or sores in your mouth, vagina, or anus. This stage usually starts with a rash on one or more areas of your body. The rash can show up when your primary sore is healing or several weeks after the sore has healed. The rash can be on the palms of your hands and/or the bottoms of your feet and look

- rough;
- red; or
- reddish-brown.

The rash usually won't itch, and it is sometimes so faint that you won't notice it. Other symptoms may 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 you receive treatment. Without the right treatment, your infection will move to the latent and possibly tertiary stages of syphilis.

Latent Stage

The latent stage of syphilis is a period when there are no visible signs or symptoms. Without treatment, you can continue to have syphilis in your body for years.

Tertiary Stage

Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop tertiary syphilis. However, when it does happen, it can affect many different organ systems. These include the heart and blood vessels, and the brain and nervous system. Tertiary syphilis is very serious and would occur 10–30 years after your infection began. In tertiary syphilis, the disease damages your internal organs and can result in death. A healthcare provider can usually diagnose tertiary syphilis with the help of multiple tests.

For more information
and service locations



Is there a cure for Syphilis?

Yes, syphilis is curable with the right antibiotics from your healthcare provider. However, treatment might not undo any damage the infection can cause.

How do people get Syphilis?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth.

Transmission of the organism occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with the disease can pass it to the babies they are carrying.

Syphilis cannot be spread through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, or eating utensils.

Where can I get tested for Syphilis?

The Houston Health Department offers Syphilis testing at its 3 health centers.

Northside Health Center

8504 Schuller Rd.,
Houston, Texas 77093

Sharpstown Health Center

6201 Bonhomme Rd.,
Houston, Texas 77036

Sunnyside Health Center

4410 Reed Rd.
Houston, Texas 77051

Walk-ins are accepted, no appointment needed.
To find the location nearest you, call 832-393-5427.

Medical Providers can report syphilis cases by calling:
855-264-8463.

