

Syphilis Stages and Symptoms

Understanding the Progression of Syphilis

Syphilis is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI), also referred to as a sexually transmitted disease (STD), caused by bacteria.

Incubation

The incubation period for syphilis is the time from exposure to clinical onset. It is when syphilis can be most difficult to detect.

- No signs or symptoms.
- Patient cannot infect others.
- Can last from 10 to 90 days, with an average of 21 days.
- Serologic tests for syphilis will be negative.

Syphilis develops in four stages after incubation: primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary or late syphilis. Symptoms can vary in each of these stages.

Syphilis Stages

Primary

- Patient is most infectious.
- Usually has one or multiple chancres, or sores, at the location where syphilis entered the body.
- The chancre will heal regardless of treatment after three to six weeks.
- Without medical attention, the patient might develop symptoms of secondary syphilis.

Secondary

- Patient is infectious.
- Symptoms usually begin with a skin rash and mucous membrane lesions.
- The rash may show up as rough, red, or reddish-brown spots on the palms of the hands, bottom of the feet, and/or torso. This rash usually does not cause itching.
- Rashes can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed.
- Other possible symptoms include fever, swollen lymph nodes, sore throat, patchy hair loss, muscle aches, fatigue, and flu-like symptoms.

Latent (Early and Late)

- Can be passed on to a fetus.
- Patient is asymptomatic but serologic testing reveals evidence of infection.
- Patients may be infectious to sexual partners during the early latent phase but later become non-infectious.
- Early latent syphilis infection contracted within the past 12 months.
- Late latent syphilis infection contracted more than 12 months ago.

Tertiary (Late)

- Patient is not infectious.
- Symptoms depend on organs involved like the brain, heart, etc.
- Usually rare and can happen several years after initial infection.

Adapted from: Centers for Disease Control (2023, December 8). About Syphilis. Syphilis. <https://www.cdc.gov/syphilis/about/index.html>