

Syphilis During Pregnancy: What You Need to Know



Department
of Health

There has been a sharp increase in the number of babies born with syphilis in New York State and throughout the United States. Syphilis can cause serious health issues for your baby.

It is important to talk to your health care provider about how you can protect your baby by getting tested for syphilis during your pregnancy.



Q: What is syphilis?

A: Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection or STI. Syphilis bacteria can enter a person's body during oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex. It can also enter the body through small cracks in a person's skin. You can get infected if you have direct contact (skin-to-skin) with someone who has a syphilis sore (chancre) anywhere on their body. Syphilis can be transmitted from a pregnant person to their baby during pregnancy or at birth. This is called **congenital syphilis**.

Syphilis has 4 stages. They are based on symptoms and how long someone has been infected. At each stage, people may not have any symptoms, or they may not notice symptoms.

1. Early syphilis can cause sores and other symptoms, such as swollen glands, tiredness, and headaches. This is called the primary stage.
2. After the first sore(s) heals, the secondary stage is marked by a rash. It often appears on the palms of a person's hands, the soles of their feet, and/or on their upper body.
3. During the third stage, there are no symptoms. This is called the latent stage. It can last for years.
4. In the final stage, untreated syphilis can lead to blindness, hearing loss, dementia, and other serious health problems. This is the tertiary stage.

If you test positive for syphilis, be sure to **get proper treatment right away. Be sure your sex partner(s) does, too.**

Q: What if I am pregnant: how can syphilis affect my baby?

A: Having syphilis while you're pregnant can have serious impacts on your baby's health. It can be passed to your baby during pregnancy, or your baby can get infected during vaginal delivery. How it affects your baby's health depends on how long you have had syphilis. It also depends on if — or when — you get treated for the infection.

Syphilis during pregnancy can cause:

- Miscarriage – losing the baby during pregnancy
- Stillbirth – a baby born dead
- Premature birth of the baby – a baby born early
- Low birth weight of the baby and other birth defects, or
- Death of the baby shortly after birth

Q: What happens when a baby is born with syphilis (congenital syphilis)?

A: If a baby is born with syphilis, they will get treatment which will cure the infection. This will help prevent any more problems from the infection. But it may not undo damage that has already happened. Protect your baby from being born with syphilis. Get tested for syphilis while you're pregnant.

Q: What are some of the major health impacts for babies exposed to or born with syphilis?

A: When a baby has been exposed to syphilis before or during childbirth, they may have:

- Deformities
- Severe anemia – low blood count
- Enlarged liver and spleen
- Jaundice – yellowing of the skin or eyes
- Brain and nerve problems, like blindness or deafness
- Meningitis – a serious infection of the areas covering the brain and spine, and/or
- Skin rashes

Q: Do all babies born with syphilis have signs or symptoms?

A: No. It is possible that a baby born with syphilis will not have any symptoms at birth. But without treatment, the baby may develop serious health problems. Usually, these health problems develop in the first few weeks after birth, but they can also happen years later. Babies born with syphilis who do not get treatment – and who later develop symptoms may experience developmental delays or seizures and – can die from the infection.

Q: I'm pregnant. Do I need to get tested for syphilis?

A: Yes. All pregnant people should be tested for syphilis 3 times during their pregnancy:

- At their first prenatal health care visit. That is, the first time you see a health care provider during pregnancy.
- At the beginning of the third trimester of pregnancy – at about 28 weeks.
- At delivery – when your baby is born.

If you are not tested at your first prenatal health care visit, be sure to ask your health care provider about getting tested during your next checkup.

Report any abnormal symptoms to your provider right away. This includes symptoms like sores or rashes.

Remember, you can have syphilis and not know it. Many people with syphilis do not have any symptoms, or the symptoms may be very mild. Also, symptoms of syphilis may be like symptoms of other health conditions.

The only way to know for sure if you have syphilis is to get tested.

Q: Is there treatment for syphilis?

A: Yes. Syphilis can be treated and cured with antibiotics. If you test positive for syphilis during pregnancy, get treated right away. Be sure that your sexual partner(s) gets tested and treated, too.

If you are diagnosed with and treated for syphilis, your health care provider should do follow-up testing for at least one year. This is to make sure that your treatment is working.

Q: How will a health care provider know if my baby has syphilis?

A: You will be tested again for syphilis at delivery. To determine if your baby has syphilis, a health care provider must look at the results of every syphilis test you had while pregnant and after delivery. They will see whether you were treated for syphilis. They may also want to test your baby's blood, perform a physical exam of your baby, or do other tests. These tests may include a spinal tap or an X-ray.

**Q: My baby was born with syphilis.
Is there a way to treat the infection?**

A: Yes. If your baby was born with syphilis, they need to be treated right away. If not treated, the baby can develop serious health problems. Depending on the results of your baby's medical evaluation, they may need antibiotics in a hospital for 10 days. In some cases, only one injection of antibiotic is needed.

Regular follow-up visits are essential after your treatment. Your health care provider will closely watch your health and assess your baby's well-being.

Q: How can I reduce the risk of my baby being born with syphilis – or having syphilis-related health problems?

A: Here are 3 important things you can do to protect your baby:

1. Reduce your chance of getting syphilis before and during your pregnancy. Preventing syphilis in yourself and your sex partner(s) is the best way to prevent your baby from getting syphilis. Your baby will not get syphilis if you do not have syphilis.
2. Talk with a health care provider about your risk for syphilis. Have an open and honest conversation about your sexual history. A health care provider can give you the best advice on any testing and treatment that you may need.
3. Test for syphilis at your first prenatal health care visit and again at about 28 weeks of pregnancy – in your third trimester. If you test positive, make sure you and your sex partner(s) get treated right away.



Get a syphilis test at your first prenatal health care visit and at about 28 weeks of pregnancy:

At your first prenatal health care visit, ask the health care provider about getting tested for syphilis. Ask again at about 28 weeks. At each visit, talk about any new or unusual physical symptoms you may have. Tell your provider about any drugs/medicines you are using. Also, let them know if you have a new sex partner or more than one partner. Even if you have been tested for syphilis in the past, you should be tested again when you get pregnant.

If you test positive for syphilis, you need to be treated **right away**. Do not wait for your next prenatal visit. It is also important that your sex partner(s) get treated. Having syphilis once does not protect you from being reinfected. Even after you've been successfully treated, you can still get syphilis again. For this reason, you must keep taking actions that will lower your risk of getting a new infection.

Reduce your risk of getting syphilis before and during your pregnancy:

Preventing syphilis in yourself and your sex partner(s) is the best way to prevent your baby from getting syphilis.

Doing these things can lower your chances of getting syphilis:

- Make sure your partner(s) is tested for syphilis and gets treated before you have sex with them.
- Every time you have oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex, use latex condoms with water-based lube, use a polyurethane (plastic) condom with silicone or water-based lube every time. However, you should know that syphilis sores sometimes occur in areas not covered by a condom. You can still get syphilis if you have close skin to skin contact with these sores.

Remember, your sexual health matters. Early detection and proper treatment are key to protecting both you and your baby.

For more information about syphilis and syphilis during pregnancy visit <https://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/std/>, <https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/3807>, or <https://www.health.ny.gov/congenitalsyphilis>.

Find out how to be tested for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections: <https://providerdirectory.aidsinstituteny.org/> or visit <https://gettested.cdc.gov/>. Testing is free, fast, and confidential.

Looking for a health care provider? You can find one in the provider directory. To find a health center near you, visit <https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/>. Treatment may be free or available at low cost.



<https://www.health.ny.gov/congenitalsyphilis>



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