

## Syphilis in the Gay Community

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*Background: In 2012, Houston saw a 97 percent increase in the number of syphilis cases, with most of the increase driven by gay men who use social networking sites to find sex partners. Although the overall number of new cases was small – 318 from January to August – the spike alarmed public health authorities. An increase in the number of syphilis cases may herald an increase in the number of new HIV infections.*

### What exactly is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by *Treponema pallidum*, a type of bug that doctors refer to as a spirochete. Syphilis has been around for centuries – many famous figures in history are thought to have died from it – though we came close in the late 1990s to eliminating it in the United States. Unfortunately, we didn't quite make it. And now we're seeing a spike in the number of new cases, mostly at the point where the sexual interests of some gay men intersect with the Internet.

### Is there any reason gay and bisexual men should be particularly concerned about syphilis?

In addition to the damage that undiagnosed and untreated syphilis can do to the human body, including possible damage to the eyes and brain, syphilis substantially increases the risk of transmitting or acquiring HIV infection. Since the prevalence of HIV infection in the gay community remains high, anything that facilitates transmission of the virus requires attention.

### How do people get syphilis?

Syphilis is transmitted during unprotected sex – including unprotected oral sex – by contact with a syphilis sore. These sores develop on the penis, on the anus or in the rectum, and in the mouth. In women, they may develop in the vagina. These sores are usually small and painless, and it may not be obvious that your sex partner has one.

### How can people know if they have syphilis?

Your health care provider will examine you for a sore, rash and other signs of syphilis. The sore is not usually painful, and the rash does not usually itch. But you may not notice any symptoms at all. Your provider can screen you for syphilis with a safe and inexpensive blood test. The results are usually available in a few days.

### Is there an at-home test for syphilis similar to the at-home tests for HIV?

No.

## **How is syphilis treated?**

It's usually treated with a couple of shots of penicillin at a single visit. But there are exceptions. Patients who are allergic to penicillin are given an oral medication that they have to take for a few weeks. And some health care providers believe that all HIV-infected patients with syphilis should be treated with a series of penicillin shots over three weeks. Also, if your health care providers aren't able to determine how long you've had syphilis, or if they suspect you've had it longer than a year, they will treat you with a series of penicillin shots over three weeks, regardless of your HIV status. Most patients complain that the shots are painful.

## **Once you've had syphilis and have been treated for it, are you immune from getting it again?**

No. Having syphilis once won't prevent you from getting it again if you're re-exposed.

## **How often should gay men get tested for syphilis?**

The Centers for Disease Control recommend that sexually active gay men get tested at least annually for syphilis. Given that we've seen a spike in syphilis cases in Houston, getting tested twice a year would be reasonable, especially if all of your sex partners aren't well known to you. And of course any time you have an episode of unprotected sex or a condom break, you should follow-up for STD screening, including syphilis testing, with your health care provider.

## **How can people protect themselves from syphilis?**

Getting into a monogamous relationship in which you and your partner both get tested is an option for many guys. Abstinence may be an option for some. Otherwise, the correct and consistent use of condoms in conjunction with regular screening is the best approach to protecting yourself not only from syphilis but also from other sexually transmitted infections as well.