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Syphilis

Most people realize how serious it can be to become infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)—the virus that causes AIDS—but many people do not realize how dangerous other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can be for their health. Syphilis is one STD that, if not treated, has the potential to be life-threatening.

The July 26, 2000, issue of JAMA includes an article about a syphilis outbreak that was linked to people who had met each other on the Internet.

WHAT IS SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is a disease caused by an organism called *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis is treated with **antibiotics**, a group of drugs used to treat infections caused by bacteria. If untreated, the organisms move throughout the body and can cause damage to many organs, making syphilis a life-threatening disease if not treated early enough.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

People who have been infected with syphilis experience different symptoms during the 3 stages of the disease. The early symptoms can be mild, so it is important to be watchful for the symptoms if you are sexually active. If you experience any of the following symptoms, or suspect that you may have had contact with a person infected with syphilis, get treatment from your physician or a clinic that specializes in STDs. A blood test can indicate if you need treatment.

1ST STAGE

FIRST-STAGE SYPHILIS SYMPTOMS:

The first symptom usually is a small sore called a **chancre** that can be painless. The chancre can appear any time from 10 days to 3 months after the time of infection. However, it usually appears within 2 to 6 weeks of infection. The chancre most often appears in the genital area, but it can appear anywhere on the body, such as the lips, mouth, tongue, or rectum. When it is on the penis or outer genitalia of a woman it will be visible, but if it is in a woman's vagina or on her cervix the chancre is difficult to notice. The chancre usually disappears within a few weeks whether or not the person gets treatment.

2ND STAGE

SECOND-STAGE SYPHILIS SYMPTOMS:

The symptoms of the second stage of syphilis often include a rash anywhere from 3 to 6 weeks after the chancre appeared. The rash may cover the whole body or may appear only in one area, but the rash usually includes the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. There may be other symptoms such as mild fever, fatigue, headache, sore throat, and swollen lymph glands. These symptoms may be mild, like the first-stage symptoms.

3RD STAGE

THIRD-STAGE SYPHILIS SYMPTOMS:

In late stage syphilis, damage occurs to the heart, eyes, brain, nervous system, bones, joints, or almost any other part of the body. The final stages of syphilis can result in neurologic problems such as mental illness or blindness, heart disease, and death.

IF YOU ARE DIAGNOSED WITH SYPHILIS:

- Get treatment for your infection from your physician or a physician at a clinic that specializes in treating STDs
- Contact anyone you have had sex with and tell them that he or she needs to get treatment
- Do not have sex with anyone else until after you are treated; ask your physician's advice—some people do not respond to the usual treatment; therefore, it is important to get your blood checked periodically to make sure you cannot infect anyone

PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM SYPHILIS:

If you have different sex partners or are unsure if your partner may be infected with syphilis (or may be in contact with someone else who is infected), you should:

- Avoid contact with any body fluids or tissues of a person infected with syphilis, such as the chancre of anyone experiencing stage 1 symptoms and the broken skin of anyone experiencing stage 2 symptoms
- Practice safe sex; avoid contact with body fluids and tissues, such as semen and vaginal fluids and any open sores; correctly use a new latex condom from the beginning throughout the duration of the sex practice every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex
- If you are sexually active, have regular check ups for STDs

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC National STD Hotline
800/227-8922 or
www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/dstdp.html
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
www.niaid.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health, The AMA Family Medical Guide, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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