



****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

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Health Department alerts the public of a significant increase in Syphilis cases

HAMILTON COUNTY, TN – The Hamilton County Health Department’s Sexual Health Clinic encourages the public to practice safe sex and routine testing after seeing a significant increase in Syphilis. [Syphilis](#) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause serious health problems without treatment.

During the pandemic, STD and STI rates declined dramatically. Several [factors](#) contributed to the initial decline in reported STD cases during the first part of 2020 but most resurged by the end of that year. Ultimately, reported cases of syphilis and congenital syphilis surpassed previous levels. Over the last year, Hamilton County has seen a [65% increase in syphilis cases](#). Although rates of Primary and Secondary syphilis are lower among women; rates have increased substantially in recent years among females who are of reproductive age.

Syphilis spreads from person to person by direct contact with a syphilitic sore, known as a chancre. Sores can occur in, on, or around the genitalia and lips or mouth. Syphilis can spread during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant individuals with syphilis can transmit the infection to their unborn children. Infection develops in stages (primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary). Each stage can have different signs and symptoms.

Primary Stage: A painless ulcer typically signifies the first stage of syphilis, but there may be multiple sores. The sore is usually firm, round, and painless. It appears at the location where syphilis enters the body. The sore lasts 3 to 6 weeks and heals regardless of whether a person receives treatment. However, the infection will progress to the secondary stage - if the person with syphilis does not receive treatment.

Secondary Stage: Skin rashes and/or mucous membrane lesions (sores in the mouth or genitalia) mark the second stage of symptoms. In addition to rashes, other signs and symptoms may include fever, swollen lymph nodes, headache, hair loss, sore throat, and muscle aches. The symptoms of secondary syphilis may go away without treatment. However, without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and possibly the tertiary stage of the disease. **At any stage of infection, Syphilis can invade the nervous system, visual system, and/or auditory system.**

Latent Stage: The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis is a period when there are no visible signs or symptoms of syphilis. Without treatment, syphilis will remain in the body even though there are no signs or symptoms. Latent syphilis can last for years.

Tertiary Stage: Tertiary syphilis is very serious and would occur 10–30 years after your infection began. Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop tertiary syphilis. However, when it does happen, it can damage your internal organs and may result in death.

Any person with signs or symptoms suggestive of syphilis should receive a test for syphilis. Anyone with a sex partner who receives a recent syphilis diagnosis should be tested and treated. Anyone who is sexually active should discuss their risk factors with a healthcare provider. In addition, healthcare providers should routinely test for syphilis in people who are pregnant, sexually active, living with HIV, and those who are taking PrEP for HIV prevention. When diagnosed and treated in its early stages, syphilis is curable.

The most effective way to prevent Syphilis is to use condoms. Condoms offer protection when the condom covers the infected area or site of potential exposure. However, syphilis transmission can occur with lesions that are not covered by the [condom](#). The only way to completely avoid syphilis is to abstain from vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

The Health Department's Sexual Health Clinic is a confidential clinic that provides testing, education, and medication regarding one's sexual health. The Clinic is open Monday - Friday 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. Appointments can be made by calling our clinic at (423) 209-8250. To learn more about the Sexual Health clinic click [here](#).

Additional resources

- Masks are encouraged while inside all Hamilton County Health Department facilities.
- To read this information in Spanish, visit the Health Department's Spanish Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/SaludHamiltonTN>