What is syphilis?
Syphilis is a bacterial infection caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. It is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can infect men, women, unborn and newborn babies. It has often been called "the great imitator" because so many of the signs and symptoms of syphilis are indistinguishable from those of other diseases.

How do you get syphilis?
Syphilis is spread:
- Through anal, vaginal or oral sex with an infected person.
- From an infected mother to her baby (during pregnancy and birth).

Can you protect yourself from syphilis?
Yes. The best ways to avoid getting syphilis are to:
- Choose not to have sex (abstinence).
- Limit your number of sex partners.
- Use a latex condom correctly each time you have sex.
- Use dental dams for oral sex (vaginal and rectal).
- Talk to your partner(s) about syphilis and other STIs.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?
You can get syphilis on the anus, mouth, penis and vagina. You may not notice any symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they may not happen in the order outlined below. Syphilis infection occurs in four stages. The symptoms associated with each stage are:

Primary syphilis has an incubation period of 10 to 90 days (an average of three weeks) after having sex with an infected person. A hard, red, painless sore called a chancre will appear at the exposure site. The chancre progresses from a papule to an ulcer. The chancre will heal in one to five weeks (an average of 3 weeks) without treatment, but syphilis still spreads through the bloodstream.

Secondary syphilis has a duration of two to six weeks (an average of four weeks). A bilateral (both sides of the body) rash usually appears on the palms of the hands and/or soles of the feet.

Symptoms
- Swollen glands (groin)
- Sore throat
- Fatigue
- Weight loss
- Patchy hair loss
- Condylomata lata (moist wart-like papules)
- General body rash
- Mucous patches (mouth and genitals)
- Headaches
- Muscle aches

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Symptoms may go away without treatment, but without treatment the infection will progress to latent stages of the disease.

Latent Syphilis occurs in two categories:
Early Latent (syphilis infection less than one year)
- No symptoms are present during this period, but syphilis is still spreading through the bloodstream.

Late Latent (syphilis infection greater than one year)
- Without treatment, symptoms may cause permanent damage to the brain, other organs, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints.

Neurosyphilis occurs when the bacteria invades the central nervous system. This may occur at any stage of syphilis, and neurosyphilis can be asymptomatic.
- Signs and symptoms of the neurosyphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness and dementia.
- Death can occur.
- Neurosyphilis can be cured but damage cannot be corrected.

You should call a health care provider of the Guilford County Department of Public Health right away if you have any of these symptoms or if you have had sex with someone who has syphilis or has these symptoms. Since the symptoms of STIs often resemble one another, diagnosis by a health care provider is the only way to know for sure if you are infected.

Is syphilis dangerous?
Yes. Syphilis causes permanent damage or death if left untreated. You have a higher risk of getting HIV infection if you have unprotected sex with a person living with HIV.

Is there a cure for syphilis?
Yes. Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. You and your current sex partner(s) need to finish all prescribed medication. You should never share your medication with your partner.

Can you still have sex?
You should not have sex until:
- You have finished the medicine.
- Anyone you are having sex with has finished the medicine.
- You have been retested by a healthcare provider.

Who can I call for more information?
American Social Health Association Hotline: (800) 227-8922, or visit www.ashastd.org .
Guilford County Department of Public Health, Greensboro or High Point: 336- 641-7777, or visit www.myguilford.com