

Syphilis is a chronic infectious disease caused by the bacterium (microorganism) *treponema pallidum*. It is transmitted by direct contact with an infected lesion, usually through sexual intercourse. When untreated, syphilis progresses through primary, secondary and latent stages. The early stages of syphilis may not have any detectable symptoms. In some cases, symptoms can remain dormant for years. Eventually any tissue or vascular organ in the body may be affected. Syphilis is caused by a bacterium (microorganism) known as *treponema pallidum* and acquired through sexual contact with an infected person. On rare occasions, health workers have become infected while examining affected individuals with infectious lesions. It may also be acquired by kissing someone with oral infectious lesions. Infected mothers can transmit syphilis to the fetus in the womb, a condition known as congenital syphilis. (For more information on this disorder choose “congenital syphilis” as your search term in the Rare Disease Database.) A diagnosis of syphilis, which is often difficult because of mild or absent symptoms in early states, is made based upon a thorough clinical evaluation, a detailed patient history, and identification of characteristic symptoms. Blood tests may be used to confirm a diagnosis of syphilis, but may be difficult to interpret and often give false negative results. A physician may also obtain a small sample of tissue by scraping an ulcer or rash for microscopic study in order to determine the presence of the syphilis bacteria.