

Screening for Syphilis Infection in Nonpregnant Adults and Adolescents

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) has issued a **final recommendation** statement on *Screening for Syphilis Infection in Nonpregnant Adults and Adolescents*. The Task Force recommends that people who are at increased risk of syphilis be screened.

This final recommendation statement applies to adults and adolescents who are at increased risk for becoming infected with syphilis and who do not have signs or symptoms of infection.

People at highest risk include men who have sex with men and people who are living with HIV. Other factors that may also increase a person's risk for syphilis include where they live, their age and gender, and their sexual networks and behaviors.

This recommendation complements the 2009 Task Force recommendation for screening for syphilis infection in all pregnant women.

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a disease caused by bacteria. It is usually passed from person to person through sexual contact. It also can pass from a mother to her baby during pregnancy.

Facts about Syphilis

The number of cases of syphilis has been increasing since 2000. In 2014, there were nearly 20,000 cases.

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. However, if it is not treated, syphilis can have very serious complications. Untreated syphilis goes through several stages, each of which has its own signs and symptoms:

- In the early stage, or **primary syphilis**, a person usually has a small, painless sore (usually in the genital area, lips, mouth, or anus).
- In the next stage, or **secondary syphilis**, a person can develop skin rashes, sore throat, swollen lymph glands, headaches, and fatigue. Symptoms will eventually go away, whether or not the infection is treated.
- In **latent syphilis**, the symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis go away. However the person continues to have the disease and, without treatment, can progress to late stage syphilis.
- **Late stage syphilis** can develop in about 15% of people who have not been treated. It can appear 1-30 years after the initial infection. In this stage, the disease can damage the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. The damage may be serious enough to cause death.

Syphilis can damage the nervous system at any stage of the disease, causing symptoms such as headaches; memory loss and changes in personality or behavior, known as dementia; and movement problems and loss of coordination.

Syphilis infection and HIV infection often occur together. Syphilis infection can increase the chances that a person may get or spread HIV.

Screening for and Treatment of Syphilis

The main goal of syphilis screening, which is done with a blood test, is to determine whether a person has the infection so that it can be treated as early as possible.

Once identified, syphilis can be treated with an antibiotic, usually penicillin, and cured at any stage.

Potential Benefits and Harms

In reviewing the evidence, the Task Force found that early detection and treatment has substantial benefits because treatment can cure syphilis, prevent the complications that occur in later stages, and prevent the spread of the infection.

Syphilis screening also may have some potential harms. Screening may suggest that the infection is present when there is no infection. This is called a “false-positive” result. False positive results can cause worry and anxiety and can lead to follow-up tests that are not needed.

The Final Recommendation on Screening for Syphilis Infection: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force’s final recommendation on screening for syphilis infection. Recommendations have letter grades. The grades are based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of interventions for this purpose. They are also based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

When the Task Force recommends an intervention (**Grade A**), it is because it has substantially more potential benefits than potential harms. The Notes explain key ideas.

Visit the Task Force Web site to read the full final [recommendation statement](#). The statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the recommendation grades. An [evidence document](#) provides more detail about the studies the Task Force reviewed.

The Task Force recommends *screening* for syphilis infection in *persons* who are *at increased risk for infection*. **Grade A**

Notes

screening

A blood test to look for evidence of syphilis infection.

persons

Adults and adolescents who are not pregnant and who do not have signs or symptoms of syphilis infection.

at increased risk for infection

People at highest risk of becoming infected are men who have sex with men and people living with HIV. Other factors that may also increase a person’s risk for syphilis include where they live, their age and gender, and their sexual networks and behaviors.

Talking to Your Doctor about Screening for Syphilis Infection

Getting the best health care means making smart decisions about what screening tests, counseling services, and preventive medicines to get and when to get them. Many people don't get the tests or counseling they need. Others get tests or counseling they don't need or that may be harmful to them.

Task Force recommendations can help you learn about screening tests, counseling services, and preventive medicines. These services can keep you healthy and prevent disease.



Deciding Whether to Be Screened for Syphilis Infection

Syphilis is an infection that can lead to very serious health problems, and even death, if it is not identified and treated. Fortunately, syphilis can be cured, even in the late stages.

People can reduce their risk for syphilis infection by always using latex condoms correctly, limiting sexual activity to one partner who does not have syphilis or by not having sex.

If you are concerned that you may have developed syphilis or are at risk of getting the infection, talk with your doctor or nurse about whether screening is right for you. Make sure your questions and concerns are answered. Consider your health and lifestyle, and think about your personal beliefs and preferences for health care. And consider scientific recommendations, like this one from the Task Force.

What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?




The Task Force is an independent, volunteer group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the **final recommendation statement**. To learn more, visit the [Task Force Web site](#).





USPSTF Recommendation Grades

Grade	Definition
A	Recommended.
B	Recommended.
C	Recommendation depends on the patient's situation.
D	Not recommended.
I statement	There is not enough evidence to make a recommendation.

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-  [Syphilis \(Medline Plus\)](#)
-  [Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Syphilis](#)
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
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