

# Syphilis (*Treponema pallidum*)

## 1996 CDC Case Definition

Syphilis is a complex sexually transmitted disease that has a highly variable clinical course. Classification by a clinician with expertise in syphilis may take precedence over the following case definitions developed for surveillance purposes.

- [Syphilis, primary](#)
- [Syphilis, secondary](#)
- [Syphilis, latent](#)
- [Syphilis, early latent](#)
- [Syphilis, late latent](#)
- [Syphilis, latent unknown duration](#)
- [Neurosyphilis](#)
- [Syphilis, late, non-neuro](#)
- [Syphilitic Stillbirth](#)

## Syphilis, primary

### Clinical description

A stage of infection with *Treponema pallidum* characterized by one or more chancres (ulcers); chancres might differ considerably in clinical appearance.

### Laboratory criteria for diagnosis

- Demonstration of *T. pallidum* in clinical specimens by darkfield microscopy, direct fluorescent antibody (DFA-TP), or equivalent methods.

### Case classification

*Probable*: a clinically compatible case with one or more ulcers (chancres) consistent with primary syphilis and a reactive serologic test (nontreponemal: Venereal Disease Research Laboratory [VDRL] or rapid plasma reagin [RPR]; treponemal: fluorescent treponemal antibody absorbed [FTA-ABS] or microhemagglutination assay for antibody to *T. pallidum* [MHA-TP])

*Confirmed*: a clinically compatible case that is laboratory confirmed

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## Syphilis, secondary

### Clinical description

A stage of infection caused by *T. pallidum* and characterized by localized or diffuse mucocutaneous lesions, often with generalized lymphadenopathy. The primary chancre may still be present.

### Laboratory criteria for diagnosis

- Demonstration of *T. pallidum* in clinical specimens by darkfield microscopy, DFA-TP, or equivalent methods

## Case classification

*Probable:* a clinically compatible case with a nontreponemal (VDRL or RPR) titer greater than or equal to 4

*Confirmed:* a clinically compatible case that is laboratory confirmed

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## Syphilis, latent

### Clinical description

A stage of infection caused by *T. pallidum* in which organisms persist in the body of the infected person without causing symptoms or signs. Latent syphilis is subdivided into early, late, and unknown categories based on the duration of infection.

### Case classification

*Probable:* no clinical signs or symptoms of syphilis and the presence of one of the following:

- No past diagnosis of syphilis, a reactive nontreponemal test (i.e., VDRL or RPR), and a reactive treponemal test (i.e., FTA-ABS or MHA-TP)
  - A past history of syphilis therapy and a current nontreponemal test titer demonstrating fourfold or greater increase from the last nontreponemal test titer
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## Syphilis, early latent

### Clinical description

A subcategory of latent syphilis. When initial infection has occurred within the previous 12 months, latent syphilis is classified as early latent.

### Case classification

*Probable:* latent syphilis (see [Syphilis, latent](#)) in a person who has evidence of having acquired the infection within the previous 12 months based on one or more of the following criteria:

- Documented seroconversion or fourfold or greater increase in titer of a nontreponemal test during the previous 12 months
- A history of symptoms consistent with primary or secondary syphilis during the previous 12 months
- A history of sexual exposure to a partner who had confirmed or probable primary or secondary syphilis or probable early latent syphilis (documented independently as duration less than 1 year)
- Reactive nontreponemal and treponemal tests from a person whose only possible exposure occurred within the preceding 12 months

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## **Syphilis, late latent**

### **Clinical description**

A subcategory of latent syphilis. When initial infection has occurred greater than 1 year previously, latent syphilis is classified as late latent.

### **Case classification**

*Probable:* latent syphilis (see Syphilis, latent) in a patient who has no evidence of having acquired the disease within the preceding 12 months (see Syphilis, early latent) and whose age and titer do not meet the criteria specified for latent syphilis of unknown duration.

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## **Syphilis, latent, of unknown duration**

### **Clinical description**

A subcategory of latent syphilis. When the date of initial infection cannot be established as having occurred within the previous year and the patient's age and titer meet criteria described below, latent syphilis is classified as latent syphilis of unknown duration.

### **Case classification**

*Probable:* latent syphilis (see Syphilis, latent) that does not meet the criteria for early latent syphilis, and the patient is aged 13-35 years and has a nontreponemal titer greater than or equal to 32

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## **Neurosyphilis**

### **Clinical description**

Evidence of central nervous system infection with *T. pallidum*

### **Laboratory criteria for diagnosis**

- A reactive serologic test for syphilis and reactive VDRL in cerebrospinal fluid (CSF)

### **Case classification**

*Probable:* syphilis of any stage, a negative VDRL in CSF, and both the following:

- Elevated CSF protein or leukocyte count in the absence of other known causes of these abnormalities
- Clinical symptoms or signs consistent with neurosyphilis without other known causes for these clinical abnormalities

*Confirmed:* syphilis of any stage that meets the laboratory criteria for neurosyphilis

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## **Syphilis, late, with clinical manifestations other than neurosyphilis (late benign syphilis and cardiovascular syphilis)**

### **Clinical description**

Clinical manifestations of late syphilis other than neurosyphilis may include inflammatory lesions of the cardiovascular system, skin, and bone. Rarely, other structures (e.g., the upper and lower respiratory tracts, mouth, eye, abdominal organs, reproductive organs, lymph nodes, and skeletal muscle) may be involved. Late syphilis usually becomes clinically manifest only after a period of 15-30 years of untreated infection.

### **Laboratory criteria for diagnosis**

Demonstration of *T. pallidum* in late lesions by fluorescent antibody or special stains (although organisms are rarely visualized in late lesions)

### **Case classification**

*Probable:* characteristic abnormalities or lesions of the cardiovascular system, skin, bone, or other structures with a reactive treponemal test, in the absence of other known causes of these abnormalities, and without CSF abnormalities and clinical symptoms or signs consistent with neurosyphilis

*Confirmed:* a clinically compatible case that is laboratory confirmed

### **Comment**

Analysis of CSF for evidence of neurosyphilis is necessary in the evaluation of late syphilis with clinical manifestations.

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## **Syphilitic Stillbirth**

### **Clinical case definition**

A fetal death that occurs after a 20-week gestation or in which the fetus weighs greater than 500 g and the mother had untreated or inadequately treated\* syphilis at delivery

## **Comment**

For reporting purposes, syphilitic stillbirths should be reported as cases of congenital syphilis.

\*Inadequate treatment consists of any non-penicillin therapy or penicillin given less than 30 days before delivery.