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Syphilis Patient Teaching Sheet

Definition: Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that is caused by the bacteria *Troponema pallidum*. It can infect the genital area, lips, mouth, throat, or anus of both men and women. Syphilis has been called “The great imitator” because its signs and symptoms are similar to other infectious diseases. Syphilis occurs in three stages: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Statistics of Syphilis

In the United States, the Center for Disease Control, reported 32,000 cases of syphilis in 2002. Most of those cases occurred in patients between the ages of 35-39 years of age. Between the years 2001-2002, the numbers of reported cases of syphilis have increased approximately 12%. It was found that men who have unprotected sex with other men are 3.5 times more likely to catch syphilis.

Stages of Syphilis

- a. **Primary**-This stage of Syphilis begins with a non-painful lesion called a chancre. A chancre is a round, firm, small painless lesion that appears where syphilis entered the body and lasts about 3-6 weeks. It will heal without treatment. If a patient ignores the chancre and does not seek medical attention, syphilis will progress to the second stage.
- b. **Secondary**-a patient who has progressed to the second stage of syphilis will develop a skin rash and lesions on the mucous membrane. A syphilitic rash appears as rough, red, or with reddish brown spots on the palms of the hands and the bottom of the feet. The rash is not itchy and it can be on other parts of the body. The rash will usually occur after the chancre is healing or has completely healed. Other symptoms include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, unusual weight loss, muscle aches (myalgias), and extreme fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will resolve without treatment. Patients who do not receive treatment during the secondary stage of syphilis will progress to the late stage of the disease.
- c. **Latent or Tertiary**-this stage can also be called the hidden stage. In this stage of syphilis, patients will not have signs and symptoms but the infection is still very active in the body. This is the stage where internal organs are damaged (brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints). This internal damage will show up years later. Signs and symptoms of end-stage syphilis include inability to coordinate muscle movements, paralysis, paresthesia (numbness), blindness, and dementia (chronic confusion). The damage may be serious enough to cause death.

It is important to know that patients can transmit infection in the primary and secondary phases of syphilis. The time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptoms are between 10-90 days, usually about 20-21 days on average.

Who is most at risk for Syphilis?

- a. People who live in poverty and cannot obtain adequate medical care
- b. African-Americans are 8 times more likely to get Syphilis

- c. The rate of pregnant women passing syphilis on to their babies in the African-American population is 28 times higher than in the White population
- d. As of 2002, most cases of syphilis were reported in the Southeast
- e. The incidence of syphilis is highest in young women aged 20-24 and men aged 35-39
- f. Men who have sex with other men have rapidly increasing rates of syphilis

How is Syphilis Transmitted?

Syphilis is transmitted between people through direct contact with a syphilis sore or chancre. Syphilis sores can be on the genitals, vagina, anus, rectum, lips, and in the mouth. Pregnant women can pass it to the babies they are carrying. You can't get syphilis through contact with toilet seats, doorknobs, swimming pools, hot tubs, bathtubs, shared clothing, and eating utensils. You cannot get rid of syphilis by washing the genital area or douching.

The Diagnosis of Syphilis

A blood test is one of the ways Syphilis is detected. Sometimes a primary care provider will take a sample of fluid from a suspected syphilis sore and look at it under a microscope, the syphilis bacteria will show up.

The Treatment of Syphilis

Syphilis is actually not a difficult disease to cure in its early stage. An injection in the muscle of penicillin will resolve syphilis. (If the patient is allergic to penicillin there are other antibiotics that can be taken) If the patient has had syphilis for more than a year it may take a longer treatment with antibiotics. A person who is being treated for syphilis must abstain from sexual contact until the syphilis sores are completely healed.

It is important to remember there are no over-the-counter drugs or home remedies that will treat syphilis. Syphilis can recur! Don't think that just because you were treated you cannot get it again. **You CAN!!!!**

Prevention: This is the most important step in avoiding syphilis as with any STD.

- a. Abstaining from sexual intercourse. (This is a sure 100% way to not get an STD)
- b. Participate in a monogamous long-term relationship with a partner who has been tested for STD's, including syphilis
- c. Always practice safe sex by using a latex condom
- d. Avoid high risk behaviors (drugs and alcohol lower our inhibitions and we can make really bad decisions)
- e. Talk to your sex partner. (Even if you are going to have sex with someone new one time only; discuss STD's and insist that a condom be worn. Ladies, it is OK to insist that a guy put a latex condom on and if he won't; tell him good-bye)

