

# Syphilis, on the rise

## What is syphilis?

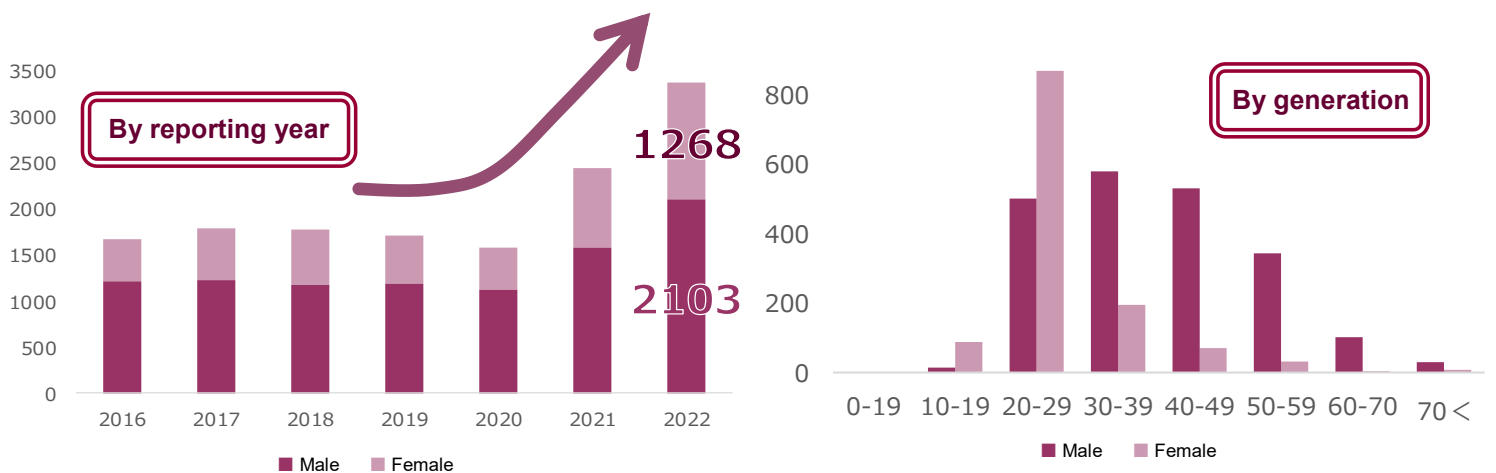
Syphilis is an infection with *Treponema pallidum*. The disease can be transmitted via mucosa and small sores on the skin during sexual intercourse. The disease is practically asymptomatic, and advances before the patient notices it. That is the reason that the disease is transmitted to other people before the patient experiences any symptoms.

From about 1 month after infection, skin rash or hard spots develop in the infected site (e.g. genital organ, anus, mouth), but these symptoms resolve in a few weeks without any treatment. The disease progresses silently while you are unaware of it, and may result in abnormalities in the heart, blood vessels, or nerves after a few years or even decades. Symptoms such as blindness and dementia may develop.

If a pregnant woman is infected with syphilis, the fetus is infected through the placenta, which might result in stillbirth, premature delivery, neonatal death, or congenital disorder (congenital syphilis).

## How widespread is it?

In the period 2016 through 2020, the number of patients remained at around 1,700 per year. Up to the 48th week in 2022, about 3,400 patients, almost twice as many, had been reported, which may surpass past records.



1st to 48th weeks of 2022

## How do you get syphilis?

During sexual intercourse, the disease is transmitted through mucosa and sores when you touch pathogen-containing secretion (e.g. sperm, vaginal secretion) or blood directly. You may be infected with syphilis repeatedly, and unintentionally transmit the disease to other people.

## Preventing syphilis

The appropriate use of condoms is effective prevention. The disease can also be transmitted when you have oral or anal sex. It is important to use a condom properly to prevent infection. Take a syphilis test if you have any concerns.

# Syphilis Q&A

## Q Is it cured naturally?

**A** Even if you are infected with syphilis, you may have no symptoms, or may have skin symptoms that are not painful. Symptoms may disappear without treatment, but the disease will not be resolved naturally, and requires treatment with antibiotics. The usual oral medication requires a large amount of tablets per dose for a long period of time.

Now an intramuscular penicillin injection has been approved and added as a treatment option other than oral medication. At an early stage after diagnosis of the infection, treatment requires only 1 injection, which is much more convenient than oral medication.

If left untreated, syphilis can cause serious problems in the nerves and the heart. Early testing and early treatment are very important.

## Q Can I get infected more than once?

**A** For a syphilis test, a doctor will take a blood sample to check the antibodies etc. in it for diagnosis. Although a certain level of antibodies are contained in the blood of infected persons, that cannot prevent re-infection. If appropriate prevention (e.g. use of a condom, treatment for the partner) is not performed, you may get infected with syphilis again.

## Q Can a condom prevent the infection?

**A** Using a condom to prevent direct contact of the infected site with mucosa and skin is useful for infection prevention. However, infection may occur via skin that is not covered with a condom, and thus, a condom cannot ensure 100% prevention. You may be infected even if you have no symptoms. Be sure to take a test.

## Q Can I take a test?

**A** If you have any symptoms, visit a medical clinic.

You can take HIV and syphilis tests for free and anonymously at a public health center or a public laboratory in Tokyo.

Tests for other sexually transmitted diseases (*Neisseria gonorrhoeae*/chlamydial infection) are also available at some public health centers.

A blood sample is collected for a syphilis test.

## Q I am worried that I may have been infected with syphilis. Who can I consult?

**A** You may consult a local public health center. If you have symptoms, visit a medical clinic.