


## Syphilis: Modern-day Version of an Ancient Disease

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### Perspective

Syphilis is a disease that has been around for a long time. It is thought to have originally spread across Europe in a pandemic in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; however it could have existed much earlier. It is thought to have been carried by historical individuals such as Henry VIII, Genghis Khan, Al Capone, and Schubert. Syphilis had all but vanished in the UK by the 1980s, thanks to the widespread availability of medicines beginning in the 1940s - but it's suddenly back. Infection rates for syphilis, as well as other sexually transmitted illnesses, have risen dramatically in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States since 2000. Its growth is attributed to changes in sexual behaviour. Syphilis, if left untreated, can lead to brain damage and death. *Treponema pallidum*, a spiral-shaped bacteria, causes syphilis. It has been unable to culture the bacteria in a laboratory since its discovery in 1905, which has hampered research efforts. Scientists have only discovered this in the last year.

In The first cases of syphilis in Europe were reported in French soldiers conquering Naples, Italy, almost 500 years ago. Because of its vast spectrum of clinical indications in addition to genital lesions, the disease has been known by various names since then, including the great imitator, and has been well reported in the scientific and historical literature. Syphilis is now easily treated with penicillin, and while it is widespread in low- and middle-income countries, where it is frequently associated with HIV co-infection, it is rare in wealthy countries. However, syphilis has resurfaced in a high-income country, with more than 80 cases reported in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, USA, in recent months. Injecting methamphetamine or heroin, the outbreak has spread among intravenous drug users. The new epidemic serves as a warning that this often-ignored and highly stigmatised

disease still poses a public health concern. A new seminar from Edward W Hook 3<sup>rd</sup> in today's Lancet focuses on the diagnosis and detection of clinical signs, disease management, and syphilis prevention initiatives. Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. It can also be spread through contact with open lesions, blood transfusions, needle sharing, or congenital transmission. The risk of transmission is greatest within the first 2–3 years following infection, after which morbidity, particularly neurosyphilis, becomes a major issue.

Primary prevention efforts such as condom use and abstinence must be expanded upon in control strategies. Surgeon General Thomas Parran of the United States of America advised universal testing, greater public and professional education, prompt treatment, and sustained study in 1937. These recommendations are still valid 80 years later. At-risk populations, such as intravenous drug users and men who have sex with males, should be constantly watched and prenatal syphilis screening and blood donation are crucial steps in preventing syphilis outbreaks. Despite the fact that it is significantly less widespread now than it was in the past, syphilis remains a public health threat that should not be neglected.