

## Historic Increases in Reported Congenital Syphilis

<b>DATE:</b>	April 16, 2024
<b>TO:</b>	Health Alert Network
<b>FROM:</b>	Debra L. Bogen, M.D., FAAP, Acting Secretary of Health
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Historic Increases in Reported Congenital Syphilis</b>
<b>DISTRIBUTION:</b>	Statewide
<b>LOCATION:</b>	N/A
<b>STREET ADDRESS:</b>	N/A
<b>COUNTY:</b>	N/A
<b>MUNICIPALITY:</b>	N/A
<b>ZIP CODE:</b>	N/A

**This transmission is a “Health Advisory” which provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.**

**HOSPITALS:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; **EMS COUNCILS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **FQHCs:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE **LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; **LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

### Summary

- In 2023, the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) reported 29 cases of Congenital Syphilis (exclusive of Philadelphia), which is the highest number reported in Pennsylvania during the documented historic record.
- There has been a significant increase in overall reported Early Syphilis cases in females. Specifically, over the last 5 years female Early Syphilis cases reported for Pennsylvania (exclusive of Philadelphia) increased 64% from 188 cases reported in 2019 to 308 cases reported in 2023.
- Of the 308 female cases of Early Syphilis reported in 2023, 89% of the cases were reported in females of reproductive age, ages 15-44.
- DOH is recommending that pregnant individuals be offered a test for Syphilis at the first prenatal visit, at the third trimester of pregnancy, and at the delivery of a child or a stillborn child.
- Due to recent nationwide shortages in Benzathine Penicillin G, some providers have not been able to obtain access to Benzathine Penicillin G for their at-risk pregnant patients. In these situations, providers are strongly encouraged to contact the DOH for Benzathine Penicillin G treatment assistance.
- If you have any questions, please call DOH at 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258) or your local health department.

### Increase in Congenital Syphilis

In calendar year (CY) 2023, DOH reported 29 cases of Congenital Syphilis (exclusive of Philadelphia). The 29 cases of Congenital Syphilis represent the highest number of Congenital

Syphilis cases reported in Pennsylvania (exclusive of Philadelphia) during the documented historic record. Of the 29 Congenital Syphilis cases reported in Pennsylvania (exclusive of Philadelphia), 62% (18 cases) were reported in individuals with no prenatal care during pregnancy.

Since 2019, there has been a 64% increase in overall reported Early Syphilis cases in females with reported cases increasing from 188 in 2019 to 308 reported cases in 2023. Of the 308 female cases of Early Syphilis reported in 2023, 89% of the cases were reported in females of reproductive age, ages 15-44.

### **Recommendations**

In response to the recent increases in both overall Early Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis the DOH is recommending the following:

1. All pregnant individuals should be offered a test for syphilis at the following intervals:
  - At the first prenatal visit to include HIV testing,
  - At the third trimester of pregnancy, and
  - At the delivery of a child or
  - At the delivery of a stillborn child.
2. All individuals with a recent positive test for another sexually transmitted disease such as gonorrhea or chlamydia should be tested for syphilis and HIV regardless of timing in pregnancy and in addition to the routine screening recommendations for each.
3. All individuals presenting with any of the following symptoms or conditions should be tested for syphilis:
  - A macular and/or papular rash on the palms of the hands or on the soles of the feet
  - A generalized rash that may be macular, papular, or papulosquamous on the back, chest, or stomach
  - A lesion in the genital, rectal, or oral area
  - Moist papules in the anogenital region or the mouth
  - Sudden “Moth-eaten” scalp alopecia with a typical onset at the back of the head
  - Loss of eyelashes and the lateral third of the eyebrows
  - Generalized lymphadenopathy
  - Malaise

\* This notice is in addition to the statewide requirement for syphilis testing contained in 28 Pa Code § 27.89 (a)(1)(i) that directs a physician who attends, treats, or examines a pregnant individual for conditions relating to pregnancy to offer the individual a test for syphilis at the time of first examination.

If a pregnant individual does not object, the test shall be performed in accordance with 28 Pa Code §27.89. If a pregnant individual objects, the regulation requires the person attending the patient to explain the need for the test. With respect to the individual who has given birth, information relating to the test or the objection to the test is to be recorded in both the patient’s medical record and in the record of the newborn, as regulation states.

As a reminder, all pregnant individuals are to be screened for the Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) on the first prenatal visit, or within 15 days, but no later than the time of delivery, as stated in PA Code §27.99.

In addition to routine testing for Hepatitis B and syphilis the DOH also recommends high risk pregnant individuals (individuals who report any of the following: previous STD such as gonorrhea or chlamydia; multiple partners; and/or drug use) should also be offered Hepatitis C and HIV testing during the third trimester of pregnancy and rapid HIV testing during labor (if not previously tested).

### **Treatment Recommendations**

1. Primary, secondary, and early latent adults (including pregnant individuals and people with HIV infection): benzathine penicillin G 2.4 million units IM in a single dose.
2. Late latent adults (including pregnant individuals and people with HIV infection): benzathine penicillin G 7.2 million units total, administered as 3 doses of 2.4 million units IM each at 1-week intervals.

**Special Note: Parenteral Benzathine penicillin G is the only therapy with documented efficacy for syphilis during pregnancy. Pregnant individuals with syphilis in any stage who report penicillin allergy should be desensitized and treated with Benzathine penicillin G. Due to the recent changes in health care delivery, some providers have not been able to obtain cost-effective access to Benzathine penicillin G for their at-risk pregnant clients. In these situations, providers are strongly encouraged to contact the Pennsylvania Department of Health for treatment assistance.**

### **Management of Sex Partners**

1. Persons who have had sexual contact with a person who receives a diagnosis of primary, secondary, or early latent syphilis <90 days before the diagnosis should be treated presumptively for early syphilis, even if serologic test results are negative or unknown.
2. Persons who have had sexual contact with a person who receives a diagnosis of primary, secondary, or early latent syphilis >90 days before the diagnosis should be treated presumptively for early syphilis if serologic test results are not immediately available and the opportunity for follow-up is uncertain. If serologic tests are negative, no treatment is needed. If serologic tests are positive, treatment should be based on clinical and serologic evaluation and syphilis stage.
3. Long-term sex partners of persons who have late latent syphilis should be evaluated clinically and serologically for syphilis and treated based on the findings.

### **Reporting Requirements**

The Department of Health requires all providers and laboratories to electronically report all diseases, infections and conditions listed in 28 Pa. Code Chapter 27, Subchapter B (relating to reporting of diseases, infections, and conditions) through its electronic disease surveillance system, PA-NEDSS. Providers are reminded that these reporting requirements expect providers to report diagnosis and treatments for positive STD cases. Providers not registered for PA-NEDSS can do so by contacting the PA-NEDSS Security Officer by email at RA-DHNEDSSACCTREQ@pa.gov or by phone at 717-783-9171.

### **Additional Information**

Physicians needing additional information are asked to call the following number:

Pennsylvania Department of Health  
Bureau of Communicable Diseases  
Division of TB/STD  
STD Program  
(717) 787-3981

8:00 A.M. – 5:00 P.M

**Additional Web Links**

Additional information on syphilis testing and treatment for pregnant individuals can be found online at: [www.cdc.gov/std/treatment](http://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment)

**Individuals interested in receiving future PA-HANs can register at:**

<https://ondemand.mir3.com/han-pa-gov/login/>

Categories of Health Alert messages:

**Health Alert:** conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

**Health Advisory:** provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

**Health Update:** provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of April 16, 2024 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.