

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

INCREASES IN CONGENITAL SYPHILIS

SEPTEMBER 21, 2017

Background

The California Department of Public Health continues to report statewide increases in syphilis among women of childbearing age (12 – 44), as well as a corresponding increase in cases of congenital syphilis. These increases are due primarily to a lack of or inadequate maternal treatment. Most women who gave birth to babies with congenital syphilis received prenatal care late in pregnancy or not at all.

Riverside County has one of the highest rates of primary and secondary syphilis in the state (11.9 cases per 100,000 as of 2016) with female cases increasing 900% between 2013 and 2016. **Preliminary numbers show that congenital cases are on the rise.** These increases represent a critical public health problem requiring immediate attention from medical providers caring for pregnant women and women of reproductive age.

Congenital Syphilis Can Be Prevented

With early diagnosis and treatment of pregnant women, congenital syphilis and its complications can be prevented. All pregnant women should receive routine prenatal care which includes syphilis testing. **In California, it is required by law that pregnant women get tested for syphilis at their first prenatal visit.**

Syphilis testing should be repeated during the third trimester (28-32 weeks gestational age) and at delivery. Routine risk assessments should be conducted throughout pregnancy and used to inform the need for additional testing. Infants should not be discharged from the hospital unless the syphilis serologic status of the mother has been determined at least once during pregnancy and, for at-risk women, again at delivery.

Clinical Recommendations

- Screen all pregnant women for syphilis at the first prenatal visit with **RPR and TPPA**
- Conduct an additional syphilis screening in the third trimester of pregnancy at 28 – 32 weeks or more frequently if indicated by risk.
- Test any woman who delivers a stillborn infant for syphilis.

Women At Risk for Syphilis

- Have signs and symptoms of syphilis infection
- Live in areas with high rates of syphilis, particularly among females
- Receive late or limited prenatal care
- Were not tested for syphilis in the first or second trimester
- Have partners that may have other partners, or partners that are MSM
- Are involved with illegal substance use
- Exchange sex for money, housing, or other resources

Treatment Recommendations

Pregnant women must be treated with a penicillin regimen appropriate to the stage of their infection. The possibility of secondary or tertiary syphilis must always be considered, even in younger individuals, and treated appropriately.

In pregnancy, penicillin is the only recommended therapy. If a pregnant woman is allergic to penicillin, she must be desensitized prior to treatment. It is important to also treat all partners to avoid re-infection. The Department of Public Health can assist you with partner notification and referral to treatment.

Reporting

California law requires that all syphilis infections be reported to the local health department within 24 hours. To report a case to the Riverside County Department of Public Health fax (951) 358-6007, or call (951) 358-7820 for further information. We can help assist you with treatment recommendations and how to ensure a case is promptly reported and managed.

Thank you for your attention to this emerging public health concern.

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