

## Public Health Alert: Outbreak: Syphilis

November 27, 2019

There continues to be an outbreak of syphilis across Alberta.

- Syphilis cases have increased from 160 in 2014 to over 1500 cases in 2018. In 2019 to date, Alberta has seen 1753 cases (1186 or 68% of these cases were in Edmonton Zone).
- Since 2014, there have been 61 cases of congenital syphilis, with 38 of these cases occurring in 2019 to date (31 of these cases were in Edmonton Zone).

In order to help control this outbreak, **the Medical Officer of Health strongly recommends your help in primary care in the following areas:**

- Create an inclusive environment that values sexual, gender and cultural diversity to ensure patients feel safe and respected as all gender and socioeconomic groups are affected by this outbreak
- Ask patients for permission to take a sexual history at every reasonable opportunity
- Provide safe sex counseling (including the use of condoms)
- Provide appropriate testing for STIs (including syphilis) and HIV for patients who are sexually active and pregnant patients

For **asymptomatic males and non-pregnant females** sexually active with new, anonymous, or multiple partners, the following screening tests are recommended every 3-6 months:

- **Serology:**
  - Syphilis enzyme immuno-assay (EIA)
  - Anti-HIV antibody
  - Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) if immunity or immunization status unknown
  - Hepatitis B surface antibody (anti-HBsAg) in individuals at high risk for infection and no previous documentation of immunity
- **First void urine (or vaginal/cervical swabs):**
  - Genprobe Aptima Combo-2 test, a nucleic acid amplification test (NAAT) for gonorrhoea and chlamydia
- **Anal and/or pharyngeal swabs:**
  - Gonorrhoea and chlamydia NAAT for persons performing oral sex and/or having receptive anal intercourse

For **all pregnant females**, in addition to the other screening tests recommended in the **Alberta Prenatal Screening Guidelines** (<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/0ac7acb6-dc90-4133-8f63-5946d4bbf4d1/resource/782751ed-17b9-4116-9aa4-227e55ec0299/download/alberta-prenatal-screening-guidelines-2018-10.pdf>), the following **STI/HIV screening tests are recommended:**

**First trimester:**

- **Serology:**
  - Syphilis enzyme immuno-assay (EIA)
  - Anti-HIV antibody
- **First void urine (or vaginal/cervical swabs):**
  - NAAT for gonorrhoea and chlamydia
- **Anal and/or pharyngeal swabs:**
  - Gonorrhoea and chlamydia NAAT for persons performing oral sex and/or having receptive anal intercourse

**At 35 weeks or later:**

- **Serology:**
  - Syphilis enzyme immuno-assay (EIA)
- **Urine:**
  - Gonorrhoea and chlamydia NAAT (only for women with ongoing risk)
- **Anal and/or pharyngeal swabs:**
  - Gonorrhoea and chlamydia NAAT for persons performing oral sex and/or having receptive anal intercourse (only for women with ongoing risk)

For guidance on treatment of STIs, please consult the **Alberta Treatment Guidelines for Sexually Transmitted Infections (2018)** (<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/93a97f17-5210-487d-a9ae-a074c66ad678/resource/bc78159b-9cc4-454e-8dcd-cc85e0fcc435/download/sti-treatment-guidelines-alberta-2018.pdf>).

Treatment and follow-up of all cases of syphilis (suspected or confirmed) should be done in consultation with STI Centralized Services. They can be reached at **1-780-735-1466** or **toll free at 1-888-535-1466**.

Sincerely,

Christopher Sikora MD MSc MPH CCFP FRCPC  
Lead Medical Officer of Health – Edmonton Zone  
Alberta Health Services

# Syphilis Outbreak

November 12, 2019

## **There is a syphilis outbreak in Alberta.**

Syphilis is an infection caused by bacteria. You get syphilis by direct contact with someone who has a syphilis sore during oral, anal or vaginal sex. This contact may have happened at any time in your life without you knowing it happened. Not everyone who becomes infected has signs of the disease. It does not go away without treatment.

Untreated syphilis in pregnancy can cause problems such as miscarriage, birth defects and stillbirth. Syphilis is passed from mother to baby during pregnancy and birth. Syphilis that passes from the mother to the baby is called congenital syphilis. It can damage your baby's bones, teeth, vision, hearing and brain development. It can also cause low red blood cells and seizures. **It is serious.**

A simple syphilis screening blood test can tell if you have syphilis. **Syphilis is treatable.** A doctor, midwife or nurse practitioner can test for the infection and give you medicine to cure it. The medication will prevent the infection from being passed on to your baby.

You can be re-infected with syphilis even if you have been treated in the past. Your sexual partners need to be tested so they can be cured too.

All women should be screened for syphilis during pregnancy. If you are pregnant, ask your doctor, midwife or nurse practitioner about testing.

## **The spread of syphilis can be stopped.**

Call your doctor or HealthLink at 811 if you want more information.

