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Clark County Combined Health District- Health Advisory
Rising Syphilis Cases in Ohio
May 6, 2022

Purpose: To communicate a rise in syphilis cases in Ohio among adults and newborns of infected mothers.

Syphilis cases are rising across Ohio among adults as well as newborns of infected mothers. The Ohio Department of Health (ODH) and Clark County Combined Health District (CCCHD) are asking healthcare providers to screen, diagnose, and treat all cases of syphilis.

Syphilis in Ohio

Preliminary data through December 2021 suggests total syphilis cases increased 45.9% over a three-year period from 2,015 cases in 2019 to 2,939 cases in 2021.

Over the same three-year time period, congenital syphilis cases – the spread of syphilis to a fetus during pregnancy – increased 152.6% from 19 cases in 2019 to 48 cases in 2021 (preliminary data through December 2021). Congenital syphilis can cause a range of other medical conditions and lead to low birth weight, prematurity, miscarriage, stillbirth, and death. Although congenital syphilis cases have been reported predominantly in large central metropolitan areas (as defined by the National Center for Health Statistics) in the past, 44% of Ohio's cases in 2021 were reported from outside of these areas.

Syphilis in Clark County

Clark County has been experiencing a syphilis outbreak since September 2020. Total syphilis cases in Clark County increased 188.9% from 36 cases in 2019 to 104 cases in 2021. While there have only been 2 cases of congenital syphilis reported in Clark County over the last 3 years, the number of infected pregnant individuals is increasing. With appropriate prenatal treatment, babies born to these individuals did not become infected with syphilis. This highlights the importance of timely entry into prenatal care.

Recommendations

Here are key steps that you as a healthcare provider can take to help reverse rising syphilis cases in Ohio:

- **Consider syphilis in making a differential diagnosis in patients with symptoms consistent with the disease, particularly in patients at risk based on their self-reported sexual behaviors** – According to disease intervention specialist case interviews with individuals diagnosed with syphilis, high-risk sexual behaviors include a previous STI diagnosis, never using a condom, sex while intoxicated by alcohol or drugs, and non-injection drug use. Two additional high-risk behaviors for men who have sex with men include sex with anonymous partners and meeting partners via the internet. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers a range of information and resources about syphilis, including diagnosis and treatment, on its website at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/default.htm>.
- **Consult the CDC Sexually Transmitted Infections Treatment Guidelines, 2021** – Syphilis treatment varies based on disease staging, pregnancy status, and patient allergies. [CDC's Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STI\) Treatment Guidelines, 2021](#) provides current evidence-based prevention, diagnostic and treatment recommendations and is intended to be a source for clinical guidance. Healthcare providers should always assess patients based on their clinical circumstances and local burden.
- **Implement third trimester screening for syphilis for pregnant individuals as a standard of care to prevent congenital syphilis** – While Ohio law mandates syphilis screening at the first prenatal visit, it may not be sufficient for those at increased risk based on self-reported sexual behavior. It is recommended that pregnant individuals be screened again at 28 weeks gestation to identify and treat syphilis prior to delivery to prevent congenital syphilis. It is recommended that a final syphilis screening be conducted at delivery.



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- **Learn more about syphilis and congenital syphilis by participating in a live webinar** – A live webinar sponsored by ODH and the STD Prevention Training Center at Columbia University will cover such topics as the clinical diagnosis and management of syphilis. This webinar is intended for clinical providers who provide patient care, and Continuing Medical Education and Nursing Education credits will be available at no charge. Registration is required. Please click on the links below to register. This webinar is being offered at the following dates/times:
 - [June 1, 2022; 8-9am](#)
 - [June 2, 2022; 12-1pm](#)

Healthcare providers should report all laboratory confirmed and clinically suspected cases of syphilis, including congenital syphilis, to the local health department where the patient resides using the [Ohio Confidential Reportable Disease Form](#). Please fax completed forms to CCCHD: 937-390-5626.

CCCHD may distribute Bicillin for the treatment of syphilis among patients whose clinical service providers are not able to supply timely treatment. This service is free of charge. If you need help providing appropriate treatment, please reach out to CCCHD's Disease Intervention Specialist (DIS), Vince Carter, at 937-390-5600 ext. 292.

Attachments:

- ODH Letter to Healthcare Providers – Addressing Rising Syphilis Cases April 28, 2022

If you are receiving this health alert via fax, please visit the CCCHD website (http://ccchd.com/?page_id=870) or follow the QR code below to view a digital copy with clickable links. If you wish to receive health alerts electronically in the future, please contact asauter@ccchd.com.

Alert Details

From: Clark County Combined Health District

Time Sensitivity: Urgent

Relevance to Public Health: High

To: Medical offices, Urgent Cares, Clinics, Hospitals, Laboratories and ICPs

Target Audience: Physicians, PA, NP, Nurses, Medical Staff, ICP staff, and Laboratorians





April 28, 2022

Dear Ohio Healthcare Provider Partners,

Syphilis cases are rising across Ohio among adults as well as newborns of infected mothers, and your help is needed to reverse this trend.

Preliminary data through December 2021 suggests total syphilis cases increased 45.9% over a three-year period from 2,015 cases in 2019 to 2,939 cases in 2021. Franklin and Cuyahoga counties accounted for half of all syphilis cases reported through December 2021.

Over the same three-year time period, congenital syphilis cases – the spread of syphilis to a fetus during pregnancy – increased 152.6% from 19 cases in 2019 to 48 cases in 2021 (preliminary data through December 2021). Congenital syphilis can cause a range of other medical conditions and lead to low birth weight, prematurity, miscarriage, stillbirth, and death. Although congenital syphilis cases have been reported predominantly in large central metropolitan areas (as defined by the National Center for Health Statistics) in the past, 44% of Ohio's cases in 2021 were reported from outside of these areas.

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If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Ren Nicosia, MPH, in the ODH STI and Viral Hepatitis Treatment and Interventions Program, at Karen.Nicosia@odh.ohio.gov.

Thank you for your help in addressing rising syphilis cases in Ohio.

Sincerely,



Bruce Vanderhoff, MD, MBA
Director of Health
Ohio Department of Health