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Department of Health

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STATE OF ALASKA

HEALTH ALERT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Health Officials Recommend Alaskan Adults be Tested for Syphilis

January 16, 2024, ANCHORAGE — Data reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show a continued surge in the number of syphilis cases in the United States over the last 10 years. This includes Alaska, where cases have risen rapidly. As recently as 2016, Alaska had just 20 cases of syphilis in a year. In 2022, Alaska had 424 syphilis cases, or more than a twenty-fold increase, and a record number of babies born with the preventable infection. Most of the 12 infants with congenital syphilis in 2022 were born in the Anchorage/Mat-Su area, although syphilis has been diagnosed in most regions in Alaska. To address this rapid increase, the CDC now recommends that most adults under age 45 in Alaska should be tested for syphilis at least once this year.

“Alaska currently has one of the highest rates of syphilis in the country,” said Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer. “Everyone of reproductive age who is sexually active should be tested for syphilis if they are unsure of their syphilis status. Everyone should get retested each time they have a new sexual partner, and every 3-6 months if they have multiple partners.”

Once infected, anyone can pass on syphilis, an infection caused by bacteria that is easily treated with antibiotics when caught early. Left untreated, adults can develop severe disease even after months or years of having no symptoms. Testing and treatment is needed to prevent complications like skin ulcers, nerve damage, bone growths, aortic aneurysm, vision loss, or other problems. “Congenital syphilis” is a serious, preventable condition that occurs when a pregnant woman with syphilis passes the infection to their fetus. It can have tragic outcomes, including fetal death, premature birth, death shortly after birth – or cause lifelong medical issues. By testing and treating widely, we can cure syphilis before it causes severe disease or impacts newborns.

“It is especially important for all expectant mothers to ask their doctor for syphilis screening testing as part of their prenatal care. Testing is recommended during the first prenatal visit, during the third trimester and again at the time of delivery,” said Dr. Joe McLaughlin, Alaska’s State Epidemiologist and Chief of Epidemiology in the Division of Public Health. “If they are not receiving prenatal care, pregnant women should promptly seek out a testing center.”

Anyone can be a carrier for syphilis, an infection caused by bacteria that is easily treated with antibiotics when caught early. “Congenital syphilis” is the term to describe the serious, preventable condition that occurs when a pregnant woman with syphilis passes the infection to their fetus. Left untreated, it can have tragic outcomes, including fetal death, premature birth, death shortly after birth – or cause lifelong medical issues. By testing and treating widely, we can cure syphilis before it impacts newborns.

“If you are pregnant, getting tested now for syphilis — and getting treated right away if you have it — can prevent your baby from getting sick,” said Staff Physician and Acting Program Manager for the state’s HIV/STD Program, Dr. Liz Ohlsen.

She further advised healthcare providers: “Getting the first syphilis test done early in pregnancy can help make sure we catch and treat syphilis early — before there are effects on the baby.”

Dr. Ohlsen also expressed appreciation for the partnership with the Department of Corrections that led to expanding testing and treatment for syphilis in inmates who choose to be tested. These actions have already helped identify and treat new cases of syphilis.

Individuals without health insurance who need syphilis testing can:

- Contact their local [public health center](#) in communities across Alaska.
- Seek help at any [Federally Qualified Health Center](#) (FQHC), which are community-based health centers that are funded in part by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), a sector of Medicare and Medicaid, to treat underserved patients.

For more information on testing and treatment for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections, including testing locations, visit [STD.Alaska.gov](#).

Resources

[STD.Alaska.gov](#)

[GetTested.CDC.gov](#)

[State of Alaska HIV/STD Program](#)

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