

# County of Santa Clara

## Public Health Department

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### HEALTH ADVISORY: Rise in Congenital Syphilis

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TO: Healthcare Providers, Hospitals, and Clinics

FROM: Sara H. Cody, MD                      Sarah C. Lewis, MD, MPH  
Health Officer                              STD/HIV Controller

Similar to other jurisdictions in California, we are seeing an increase in reports of syphilis, and of particular concern, congenital syphilis. The rate of early syphilis infections in Santa Clara County has risen from 4.9 cases per 100,000 in 2007 to 11.6 cases per 100,000 in 2015. Since January 2016, three cases of congenital syphilis have been reported in Santa Clara County, more than were reported in the previous four years combined.

Syphilis is a bacterial infection primarily spread from person to person through sexual contact; the infection may be asymptomatic or may present as oral or genital sores, rash, fever, swollen lymph nodes, vision or hearing changes, or in later stages, with heart, bones, or brain findings. Syphilis may spread from an infected pregnant woman to her developing fetus and cause congenital syphilis. If untreated, congenital syphilis can lead to severe birth defects, developmental problems, or fetal demise.

All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis at their first visit for prenatal care and at least once by the time of delivery. Women at higher risk for syphilis, should be tested again during the third trimester, including those with syphilis or other sexually transmitted infections in the past, HIV infection, recent incarceration, recently incarcerated sexual partner, male sexual partner who has other male partners, use of drugs of abuse, or exchange of sex for money, drugs, or other resources.

#### Recommendations for Healthcare Professionals:

1. Test all pregnant women for syphilis at their first prenatal visit.
2. Perform syphilis testing at time of delivery if no prior test can be confirmed or if the patient tested positive for syphilis previously.
3. Test all patients for HIV if they have tested positive for syphilis.
4. Report all syphilis cases to the Public Health Department within one working day of diagnosis. (Required by Title 17, California Code of Regulations Section 2500.)

Information about congenital syphilis for patients may be found here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-congenital-syphilis.htm>

In addition to clinical guidance for providers, the Santa Clara County Public Health Department provides access to low-cost syphilis testing and treatment and connection to prenatal care. Please contact the STD/HIV Prevention & Control Program at 408-792-3739 with any questions.

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.