

Infectious Syphilis ALERT

Information for Aboriginal medical services, sexual health clinicians, general practitioners and antenatal services



Health

Key points:

1. A large syphilis outbreak among Aboriginal people in Qld, NT, WA and SA could spread to NSW.
2. Screen Aboriginal clients regularly, particularly :
 - Those under 35 years of age
 - Pregnant women early in gestation AND at 24-28 weeks
 - As part of MBS item 715 health checks
3. Seek help with syphilis testing, treatment and contact tracing from your local sexual health clinic or Sexual Health InfoLink on 1800 451 624

Syphilis

- Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI), transmitted via vaginal, anal and oral sex
- Highly infectious in the first two years after infection, it also increases risk of HIV transmission
- Symptoms usually begin within three weeks of exposure, but can appear up to three months later
- Can cause stillbirth, preterm labour and congenital abnormalities

Current status of the outbreak among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 31 October 2018

- An ongoing outbreak of syphilis has spread amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across mainly rural and remote areas of Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, and most recently metropolitan Adelaide
- There have been 2,378 outbreak cases since 2011, including 15 congenital cases with 7 deaths

When to request syphilis serology?

- Screen all Aboriginal people under 35 years of age as part of a STI screen and opportunistically
- Screen during antenatal testing at the first visit and repeat at 24-28 weeks for all pregnant Aboriginal women and other pregnant women whose baby will be identified as Aboriginal
- Test for syphilis and HIV if you are managing any other STI and during MBS item 715 health checks

Think of syphilis when

- There is a painless ulcer (chancre) in the genital, anal, oral areas or other body region (take PCR swab)
- There is a rash anywhere on the body, this may include the hands and soles of the feet

Treatment for infectious syphilis

- Benzathine penicillin, 1.8 g IMI stat, refer to the Australian STI management guidelines
- Pregnant women diagnosed in the third trimester need a second dose one week later
- For penicillin allergy, contact your local sexual health clinic
- Advise no sexual contact for seven days after treatment
- Reinforce safe sex messages, including using condoms and lubricant

Notification and treatment of partners to prevent further transmission

- Partner notification is essential; sexual health clinics or NSW Sexual Health Info Link can assist
- For primary syphilis treat and test all sexual partners in the previous 3 months; for secondary syphilis, treat and test all sexual partners in the previous 6 months plus duration of symptoms.
- If sexual exposure in an outbreak region or with a person from an outbreak region is reported or suspected, inform your local public health unit.

More information and help

- NSW Sexual Health Info Link: 1800 451 624 or www.shil.nsw.gov.au
- Australian STI management guidelines www.sti.guidelines.org.au

Dr Vicky Sheppard

Director, Communicable Diseases Branch
Health Protection NSW
23 January 2019

NSW Ministry of Health

ABN 92 697 899 630

73 Miller St North Sydney NSW 2060
Locked Mail Bag 961 North Sydney NSW 2059
Tel. (02) 9391 9000 Fax. (02) 9391 9101
Website. www.health.nsw.gov.au