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## **Department of Health Stresses Testing During Pregnancy to Prevent Babies from Being Born with Syphilis**

*Babies born with congenital syphilis hits highest level in 32 years*

**Harrisburg, PA** – Acting Secretary of Health and Pennsylvania Physician General Dr. Denise Johnson is strongly encouraging pregnant people to seek prenatal care and get tested for syphilis during pregnancy to reverse the recent trend of babies being born with the disease. Congenital syphilis is a disease that occurs when a pregnant person with syphilis passes the infection onto a baby during pregnancy. It can cause miscarriages, stillbirths, premature births, low birth weight or death shortly after birth.

“Congenital syphilis can be a painful disease that is dangerous for the overall health of babies. It also is preventable,” said Dr. Johnson. “We need to educate pregnant people about the importance of testing for syphilis throughout the pregnancy in order to stop children from being born with the disease and to reduce the chance of stillbirths.”

The department is focusing its educational outreach toward pregnant individuals and others of reproductive age, while also reminding health care professionals about the importance of testing patients for syphilis during pregnancy.

“Pregnant patients need to understand that syphilis can be treated and cured with antibiotics. If anyone tests positive for syphilis during pregnancy, they should seek treatment right away,” Johnson added. “We hope that by openly talking about this issue, we can reduce stigma surrounding syphilis testing, and ultimately, increase the number of healthy child births across the state.”

There have been 12 confirmed cases of congenital syphilis in Pennsylvania (excluding Philadelphia) so far in 2022, along with two stillbirths. This marks the highest level of cases since 1990, when there were 17 confirmed cases. In addition, the department has seen a disturbing trend over the past five years with 39 confirmed cases of congenital syphilis (excluding Philadelphia) since 2018, compared to six confirmed cases of the disease over the previous five years.

The department notes that the number of congenital syphilis cases have risen as the number of early syphilis cases among women of childbearing age has jumped substantially over the past decade, from 29 cases in 2010 to 211 cases in 2021.

The department recommends that health care providers screen all pregnant people for syphilis at the first prenatal visit, during the third trimester and at delivery. Healthcare providers needing additional information are asked to call the department’s Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) program at 717-787-3981.

Additional information about congenital syphilis and pregnancy and the importance of testing and treating the disease can be found at [Congenital Syphilis \(pa.gov\)](https://www.pa.gov/congenital-syphilis).

**MEDIA CONTACT:** Mark O'Neill, [ra-dhpressoffice@pa.gov](mailto:ra-dhpressoffice@pa.gov)