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Department of Health Working to Reduce Number of Infants with Newborn Syphilis as Cases Rise Nationwide, Strongly Encourages Women to Get Tested for Syphilis

Wilkes-Barre, PA – During a news conference today at the Wilkes-Barre Health Department, state and local health department leaders strongly encouraged pregnant women to seek prenatal care and ask their healthcare provider about getting tested for syphilis during pregnancy to prevent newborn (congenital) syphilis as cases rise across the country to near record-high levels.

Newborn syphilis occurs when a pregnant woman 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.

“There is no reason for a baby to be born with this dangerous disease – newborn syphilis is preventable with appropriate prenatal care, testing and treatment,” said **Acting Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen**. “Together with local health care providers, we want people to know there are simple tests to diagnose syphilis and treatments available to cure syphilis across the lifespan. By identifying and treating syphilis before or during pregnancy, we can prevent newborn syphilis.”

The Department of Health is also focused on educational outreach to remind health care professionals about the importance of testing patients for syphilis, especially during pregnancy.

“In addition to issuing a [Health Alert Network advisory](#) earlier this year to health care professionals across the state, we recently worked directly with the Wilkes-Barre Health Department to send letters to more than 600 physicians in Luzerne County to raise awareness about the syphilis testing and treatment recommendations for pregnant women,” said **Acting Secretary Bogen**.

The Department of Health continues to offer online webinars for health care providers to address this issue.

A lack of timely testing and adequate treatment contributed to almost 90 percent of newborn syphilis cases in the United States in 2022, according to a recent [report from the CDC](#).

“Talking openly about syphilis and newborn syphilis specifically can help reduce the stigma surrounding the disease and increase the number of healthy child births across the state,” said **Acting Secretary Bogen**. “We want everyone to know that there is free and confidential testing and treatment available for syphilis and other infections at locations across the Commonwealth.”

The list of providers by county that offer free testing and treatment service is available on the Department of Health website at: [STD Providers](#).

So far in 2023, DOH has confirmed 31 infants with newborn (congenital) syphilis from 16 Pennsylvania counties across the state. In 2022, 39 infants in Pennsylvania were confirmed to have newborn syphilis, making it the highest number since 1990, when there were 17 infants.

The Department notes that the number of newborn syphilis cases has risen as the number of early syphilis cases among women of childbearing age has jumped substantially over the past decade, from 98 cases statewide in 2010 to 587 cases in 2022. That’s why it’s essential for people to get tested – not just pregnant women.

The Department recommends that health care providers follow CDC guidance to screen all pregnant women 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 newborn syphilis and pregnancy and the importance of testing and treating the disease can be found at [Syphilis and Pregnancy](#); information about syphilis in general can be [found on this page](#).

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