

HEALTH ALERT

Ongoing Increase in Syphilis in Women Calls for Testing All Pregnant Women in the First Trimester, Third Trimester, and at Delivery

Situation: Kern County is experiencing an increase in heterosexual transmission of syphilis, syphilis in women, and congenital syphilis. In 2015, 62% of primary and secondary syphilis cases reported only heterosexual contact. Syphilis in women has increased dramatically, and now accounts for 28% of all reported primary and secondary syphilis in the county. In 2015, 28 infants were reported with congenital syphilis, compared to 18 infants in 2014 and 4 infants diagnosed in 2013.

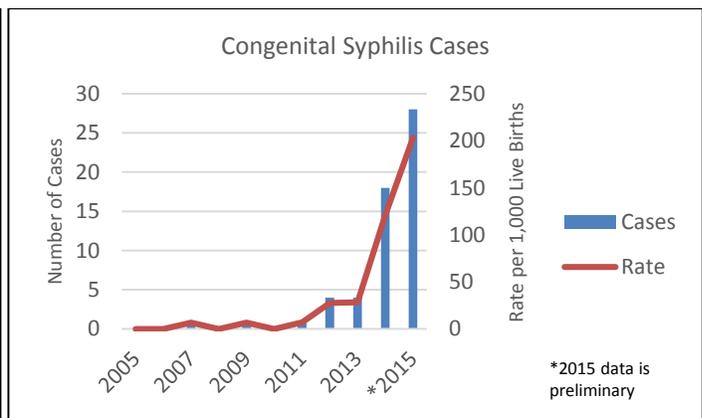
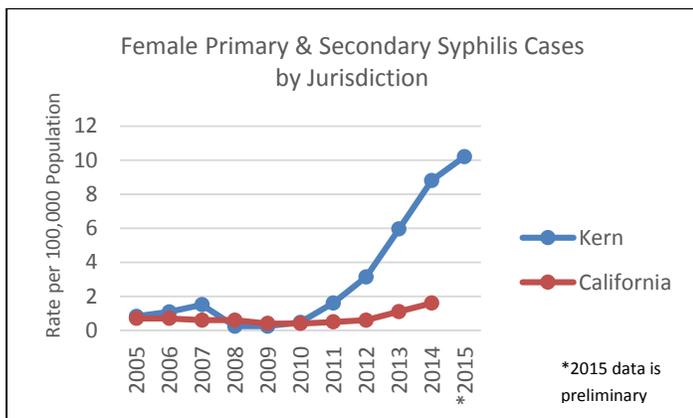
The Health Officer is designating Kern County as an area with high syphilis morbidity.

Such a designation calls for all clinicians to follow best practices and guidelines established by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force (USPSTF). These guidelines recommend screening for syphilis THREE times during all pregnancies:

- First trimester (or initial prenatal visit)
- Early in third trimester
- At delivery

Additionally, the Health Officer recommends that any pregnant woman presenting at an urgent care center or emergency department be screened for syphilis if her syphilis status is unknown, regardless of the reason for visit.

Background: Reported cases of primary and secondary syphilis have increased dramatically in the past ten years, particularly among females. While syphilis has historically been transmitted among men who have sex with men, Kern County (and much of the Central Valley) has seen a dramatic increase in heterosexual transmission. Female primary and secondary syphilis cases increased from 3 cases in 2005 to 44 cases in 2015. The rate among females in Kern County is more than 5 times higher than the stage average. Congenital syphilis (CS) cases have increased exponentially in Kern County over the past three years. In 2014, Kern County had a higher CS rate than any other county in California (2015 comparisons are not yet available). The 28 CS cases in 2015 include five fetal demises and one perinatal death.



Actions Requested of Clinicians

- **Counsel all women of child-bearing age about the risks of syphilis and other STDs in Kern County.** As syphilis has not historically been a common STD in Kern County or among women in general, many women have little knowledge of the signs, symptoms, and risks associated with infection. Many women are unaware that an untreated syphilis infection, now asymptomatic, can factor into poor pregnancy outcomes months and years later.
- **Consider syphilis in all pregnant women.** Due to high syphilis morbidity in Kern County, particularly among females, routine assessments of high-risk sexual activity may not be sufficient to identify true risk for syphilis infection.
- **Test all pregnant women for syphilis.** Testing for syphilis at the first prenatal visit, and at the beginning of the third trimester improves the chances of diagnosing and treating pregnant women with syphilis prior to delivery. Because syphilis may be acquired at any time during pregnancy, mothers should also be screened at time of delivery. Infants should not be discharged from the hospital until the result of syphilis serologic testing of the mother at the time of delivery is available.
 - Third trimester syphilis testing is recommended at the same time as the Tdap vaccine. Linking these two prevention activities may help implementation.
- **Treat syphilis in pregnant women as soon as the infection is identified.** Pregnant women should be treated with a penicillin regimen (benzathine penicillin G [Bicilin LA] 2.4 mu IM) appropriate for their stage of infection. Penicillin is the only therapy proven to be effective in pregnancy. Pregnant women with a history of allergy to penicillin should desensitized and treated with penicillin. Treatment at least 30 days before delivery is 98% effective at preventing congenital syphilis. If you have any treatment questions, contact the Kern County Public Health Services Department (KCPHSD) STD Program at (661) 321-3000.
- **Prevent reinfection of pregnant women by treating all sex partners.** Alternately, you may refer partners to KCPHSD for treatment.
- **Report all syphilis cases to the KCPHSD** within one working day of diagnosis. Confidential Morbidity Reports (CMR) can be transmitted electronically through CalREDIE, faxed to the STD Program at (661) 868-0261, or mailed to KCPHSD STD Program, 1800 Mt Vernon Avenue, Bakersfield, CA 93306.

Sexually transmitted infection screening recommendations can be found on the California Department of Public Health website at <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/std/Documents/STD-Screening-Recs.pdf>.

Full sexually transmitted infection treatment guidelines can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/default.htm>.

If you have any questions, please contact KCPHSD at (661) 321-3000. Thank you for your commitment to the health of the community.