

June 28, 2017

Syphilis on the rise in Kitsap County and statewide

Actions Requested

- **Notify us as soon as possible when you suspect or diagnose (with or without lab results) a case of syphilis.**
 - Legally, reporting is required within 3 business days. In practice, the closer to diagnosis that we are informed, the better information we can glean during our contact investigation – a critical part of prevention and control.
- **Consult us if you are unsure about whether a patient's symptoms are consistent with syphilis.**
 - Call while the patient is still in your office. Our STD staff can discuss the potential diagnosis and treatment.
- **Remember that Bicillin-LA (benzathine penicillin G) is the gold standard for treatment.**
 - Some preparations (e.g., Bicillin C-R) are not appropriate because they provide inadequate doses of penicillin.
 - We can help you/your patient access Bicillin-LA if you do not have it in stock.
- **Be aware that syphilis is on the rise locally, thus consider it in your differential diagnosis as appropriate.**
 - Both ocular and congenital syphilis cases have increased statewide. If you diagnose either, please notify us right away. For ocular cases, we can help arrange recommended molecular testing via the Public Health Laboratories.
- **Screen all pregnant women for syphilis at their first prenatal visit or at the time pregnancy is confirmed.**

For questions, please contact our Communicable Disease staff at 360-728-2235.

Background

Last year, there were 5 congenital syphilis cases statewide. Nationally, congenital cases are also on the rise. In Kitsap County, the last occurrence was in 2014. Congenital syphilis can result in significant health problems for an infant, and the resurgence suggests missed opportunities for prevention. See the DOH State Health Officer letter regarding screening in pregnancy.

While syphilis of any type is still a relatively rare diagnosis in Kitsap County, our annual rate has been increasing (*see graph*). As syphilis rates climb, there tend to be more female cases and subsequently the likelihood of congenital cases increases. In the interest of prevention, we want to raise your awareness of both the disease and our local trends.

From January 2016 through May 2017, a total of 33 syphilis cases among Kitsap residents were reported. Of these, 61% were men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM), 27% were non-MSM males, and 9% were female. This is typical of most years, though in 2014, when our congenital case occurred, females accounted for 40% of our cases.

The majority (61%) of our cases since January 2016 are primary and secondary syphilis. This means most are newly acquired and at in the most infectious stages, so our contact tracing is critical for controlling further spread. Yet it also means more than a third of cases have gone beyond the initial stages of disease. Earlier diagnosis is ideal for both patient outcomes and prevention, therefore we urge you to keep syphilis in your differential diagnosis, as appropriate.

Syphilis is known as “the great imitator” for a reason: it has a wide range of clinical presentations, including genital, anal, or oral chancres (painless), rashes or mucous membrane lesions, cardiovascular and neurological manifestations, and involvement of other organs. This alone can make diagnosis challenging. Given its relatively low (albeit increasing) incidence, healthcare providers may not be certain of the diagnosis when they see a potential case. We strongly encourage consultations if you are unsure.

Note that an unusual cluster of ocular syphilis was detected in Seattle during late 2014. Since then, reports of ocular syphilis have increased nationwide, with the majority among HIV-infected MSM but some among HIV-uninfected persons too – including heterosexual men and women. Several have resulted in significant sequelae including blindness. A single case of ocular syphilis in Kitsap occurred in 2016. We have had 2 other neurosyphilis cases since January 2016.

Resources

- WA DOH Health Officer letter: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/5620/PerinatalProviderSyphilisTesting.pdf>
- CDC Syphilis treatment webpage (with link to STD Treatment Guidelines): <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/treatment.htm>
- STD case report form: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/347-102-KitsapCsRpt.pdf>