

Changing the Story of Syphilis

STD Prevention
**SUCCESS
STORIES**



Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that can cause serious health problems if left untreated or isn't treated correctly. Syphilis spreads during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. It can also spread from a mother to her unborn baby — this is called congenital syphilis.

A disturbing trend

After national syphilis rates hit historic lows in 2001, they increased almost every year since, peaking in 2014 with the highest rate reported in 20 years.

22.7%

the syphilis case rate increase in women from 2013 to 2014

19,999

the number of syphilis cases reported in 2014 (compared to **6,103** in 2001)

37%

the congenital syphilis case rate increase from 2012 to 2014

Before 2013, increasing syphilis rates were mainly due to cases in men — particularly in men who have sex with men (MSM). But from 2013 to 2014, syphilis rates also increased in women. And more syphilis cases in women means more cases of congenital syphilis in babies. Serious health problems from syphilis, like syphilis of the eye, are increasing among both men and women.

The good news

Syphilis is curable with the right antibiotics. That means managing and preventing syphilis comes down to reaching individuals at risk — ensuring access to testing, diagnosis, proper treatment, follow-up care, and care for partners of those infected. Here are two stories of public health programs going the extra mile to achieve these goals.

KS

Protecting Babies in Kansas

A day at work for a Disease Intervention Specialist (DIS) might include endless phone calls and doorbell-ringing as they try to reach patients who have tested positive, their partners, their social networks — anyone who might be able to help locate new cases or keep a new one from happening.

Because they built a trusting relationship with their client, Kansas DIS prevented a case of congenital syphilis.

It's not an easy job. Just ask Scott Strobel, a DIS at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) under Bureau Director Jennifer VandeVelde. "You have to slug through a lot of darkness to get to those moments when someone actually says, 'thank you for finding me,'" says Strobel.

VandeVelde and her team recall a recent case in which a woman with syphilis suspected her partner was also infected. Though he was diagnosed, he didn't agree to treatment — until she learned she was pregnant. "The first phone call she made was back to the DIS," says VandeVelde. "They had developed a relationship with her." With help from the DIS, the woman and her partner were treated — most likely preventing a case of congenital syphilis in their baby.

VandeVelde reiterated the value of DIS in STD prevention, and emphasized that frequent training is key for developing and maintaining a strong DIS team. "It's all about the basics of DIS work taught in CDC trainings — conveying a sense of urgency, being persistent, and not giving the client a better option than to get treatment." That isn't easy to do, but for the team at KDHE, the outcome is worth it.

WA

Bicillin Delivery in Washington

Bicillin is the CDC-recommended treatment for syphilis, but many health care providers don't stock it. It's given as an injection, so it needs to be stored in a refrigerator. It's also not used a lot, as syphilis rates in many communities are still relatively low.

If a provider prescribes bicillin but doesn't stock it, the responsibility falls on the patient: they'll need to find a pharmacy who has bicillin, keep it refrigerated, and go back to their doctor to get the injection. These steps can lead to delays in treatment — or, worse, a patient not getting treated at all. This increases the risk of syphilis spreading in the community.

Enter the bicillin delivery program run by Mark Aubin, STD Controller at the Washington State Department of Health (Washington DOH). Aubin and his team help providers get syphilis patients the medicine they need by hand delivering the bicillin to clinics and providers' offices.

When Aubin's team learns of a new case, they call the provider, send treatment guidelines, and find out if the provider stocks bicillin. If not, they hand deliver the medicine to the doctor's office.

"We want treatment to happen the same day as the positive test," says Aubin. The bicillin delivery program at the Washington DOH is making that outcome possible — one delivery at a time.

Learn **MORE** at cdc.gov/std

- [Syphilis Fact Sheet](#)
- [Congenital Syphilis Fact Sheet](#)