

Syphilis Elimination Key Messages

- The Syphilis Elimination Effort (SEE) is a national initiative bringing together health care providers, community organizations, and community leaders to eliminate syphilis in this country. The goals of this effort are to reduce the number of infectious syphilis cases in the United States and to increase the number of syphilis-free counties. SEE is part of the National Plan to Eliminate Syphilis, developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its federal, state, and local partners.
- This nationwide effort aims to reduce the total number of primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis cases to less than 1,000 or 0.4 cases/100,000 people, and to make at least 90 percent of United States counties syphilis free.
- U.S syphilis rates decreased during the 1990s and reached a record low in 2000. However, these rates have begun rising again, increasing slightly in 2001 and more substantially in 2002. In 2003, reported P&S syphilis cases increased 4.6 percent. Because syphilis tends to rebound in 7- to 10-year cycles, we must seize this opportunity to eliminate syphilis now, while rates are still relatively low.
- Syphilis is preventable and treatable. Its spread can be stopped. The time to act is now - while syphilis rates remain relatively low. Syphilis prevention methods (or strategies) can include abstinence, monogamy, i.e., being faithful to a single sex partner, or using condoms consistently and correctly. These approaches can avoid risk (abstinence) or effectively reduce risk for getting syphilis (monogamy, consistent and correct condom use). In addition, by helping detect syphilis early and providing treatment and counseling messages, we can help make our community healthier now and in the future.
- We now have an opportunity to decrease one of the most glaring racial disparities in health. When compared to other racial groups, African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately affected by syphilis. In 2003, the P&S syphilis rate among African Americans (7.8 cases/100,000 people) was 5.2 times greater than the rate reported among non-Hispanic whites (1.5 cases/100,000 people). The rate among Hispanics (3 cases/100,000 people) was twice the amount reported among non-Hispanic whites. The number of infectious syphilis cases among Latino men has more than doubled between 2000 and 2002. In 2003, 16.2% of all P&S syphilis cases occurred among Hispanics.

- Syphilis can be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy (congenital syphilis), leading to stillbirths, health complications, congenital deformities, and even infant death. In 2003, the rate of congenital syphilis was 26 times higher among African American infants (33.9 cases/100,000 live births), and 14 times higher among Hispanic infants (18.1 cases/100,000 live births), compared to non-Hispanic white infants (1.3 cases/100,000 live births). In addition, syphilis increases the chance of HIV transmission by 2-5 times. By eliminating syphilis, communities can improve infant health, slow the spread of HIV infection, and reduce disparities in health.
- Recently, syphilis rates among U.S. men have been on the rise. Between 2000 and 2002, overall syphilis rates among men rose by about 46 percent (from 2.6 to 3.8 cases/100,000 people), an increase that coincided with outbreaks among gay and bisexual men in several cities, including Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, New York City, Chicago, and Miami Beach, among others, possibly reflecting an increase in risky behavior in this population. The rate of P&S syphilis increased 13.5% among men between 2002 and 2003.
- Eliminating syphilis will strengthen the overall public health status in this country. Ridding the U.S. of syphilis will be an important step in improving the overall health of our communities, and the health of generations to come.
- With syphilis rates decreasing among women and African American populations, and with most cases concentrated in the South and in urban areas, there is a brief window of opportunity to eliminate syphilis in the United States. One of the challenges in taking advantage of this window will be maintaining support at the local, state and federal levels until elimination is achieved.
- Syphilis elimination will only work if you and others like you are involved.
- The syphilis elimination plan outlines five strategies:
 - Increase monitoring and tracking
 - Strengthen community involvement and partnerships
 - Rapidly respond to outbreaks
 - Raise community health awareness
 - Expand clinical and laboratory services