

## Health Advisory: New Syphilis and Hepatitis A Cases in Tri-County Area

Minnesota Department of Health, Mon, June 22 10:00 CDT 2020

### Action Steps

**Local and tribal health departments:** Please forward to hospitals, urgent care centers, clinics, and convenience clinics in **Beltrami, Cass, and Itasca** counties plus to **Leech Lake, Red Lake and White Earth** tribes.

**Hospitals and clinics:** Please distribute to health care professionals who treat patients at risk for sexually transmitted diseases in this geographic area.

**Health care providers:**

- Obtain a complete sexual risk history of all sexually active patients to determine if they should be tested for syphilis.
- Test for syphilis in patients presenting with anogenital or oral lesions or rash without clear etiology.
- Test pregnant persons for syphilis at first prenatal care visit, early in the third trimester (28-32 weeks' gestation), and at delivery if at high-risk.
- Test and treat sex partners of patients who test positive for syphilis.
- Treat patients that test positive with long acting penicillin G IM.
- Test patients with hepatitis A symptoms, testing should include hepatitis A IgM antibody testing and liver function tests.
- Test persons who inject drugs for HIV and hepatitis C and promote hepatitis A vaccine for these high risk patients.
- Report cases within 24 hours to MDH at 1-877-676-5414 (toll-free) or 651-201-5414.

### Background

The rates of syphilis in Minnesota have been concerning for many years. In mid-2019 the Minnesota Department of Health declared an outbreak in the Northwest and Central Minnesota regions, including Beltrami and Cass counties. This outbreak is ongoing. However, a recent cluster is emerging in the tri-county area of Itasca, Beltrami and Cass counties. Of particular concern is the rising case count in Itasca County. As of June 1st, 2020, preliminary data from Itasca County shows 6 cases reported, compared to 5 cases reported for all of 2019. Increased awareness for symptoms of syphilis especially among persons who inject drugs and increased testing and treatment are needed to interrupt transmission to other residents of the area.

Further, there is an ongoing outbreak of hepatitis A in Minnesota that is affecting persons with the similar risk factors including injection and non-injection drug use, transient housing, and current or recent incarceration. A case of hepatitis A was identified at the end of April in Itasca County. Additionally, Beltrami County had two cases of hepatitis A in early 2020 and Cass County has had 4 cases in 2020, with the most recent reported in mid-April. These individuals are not known to be linked to one another.

## Testing

Test patients who have symptoms of syphilis, are pregnant, or are asymptomatic and at risk. Symptoms of syphilis can vary with stage of the disease and can most commonly include swollen lymph nodes, sores on the skin (mouth, vagina or anus), fever, weight loss, and hair loss. Sores on the skin, also known as syphilis chancres, can easily be confused with herpes. Also syphilitic skin rashes that can occur in the secondary stage can be mistaken for other dermatologic conditions.

For any positive case make sure that sexual partners are tested and treated for syphilis. Providers should encourage the patient to work with the [MDH Partner Services Program](#) to help control further spread of syphilis.

It is important to screen pregnant women for syphilis to lessen the impact of congenital syphilis. Updated guidelines for syphilis screening during pregnancy visits are available on the MDH website at [Syphilis Screening During Pregnancy](#).

Test patients for hepatitis A if presenting with clinically compatible symptoms. Do not test asymptomatic patients. Testing should include hepatitis A IgM antibody testing and liver function tests.

Hepatitis A symptoms include: fever, headache, fatigue, malaise, nausea, anorexia, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, dark urine, light colored stool, and jaundice.

## Vaccinate

Promote hepatitis A vaccine among patients, including:

- People who use injection and non-injection drugs.
- People experiencing homelessness or unstable housing.
- People who are currently or were recently incarcerated.
- Men who have sex with men.
- People with direct contact with someone who has hepatitis A.
- People traveling to areas where hepatitis A is common.
- All people who wish to be protected.

One dose of single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine has been shown to control outbreaks and provides protection in most individuals, but two doses should be given to ensure long-term protection.

## Additional Resources

- [MDH Syphilis Website](#)
- [MDH Syphilis Case Counts](#)  
County level syphilis data are updated monthly.
- [MDH Hepatitis A](#)  
Hepatitis A for clinicians and the general public.

A copy of this HAN is available on the [MDH Health Alert Network](#) page. The content of this message is intended for public health and health care personnel and response partners who have a need to know the information to perform their duties.