

# Montana syphilis cases quadruple since 2021

By Stacie Pannell

Montana is suffering a new outbreak of an old sexually transmitted infection: syphilis. This is a serious disease that attacks the central nervous system. Syphilis can cause loss of sight, loss of hearing and brain damage.

Fortunately, syphilis is treatable and curable. However, when infected people don't get treated quickly, the damage done to the brain and nervous system is not reversible. Delayed treatment is more complicated and may require hospitalization. With testing and early treatment, most people are cured with one dose of an appropriate antibiotic.

The most important step to protect yourself against syphilis is to get tested. If you are being tested for any STI, ask your healthcare provider to also test for syphilis. Because syphilis cases used to be less common, some doctors were not routinely testing for that bacteria. Now, syphilis testing is urgent for sexually active people.

So far this year, the state logged 618 cases, compared with 431 at this time in 2022 and 135 at this point in 2021. Most of this year's cases are concentrated in four counties: Yellowstone with 153 cases, Roosevelt with 97 cases, Rosebud with 84 cases and Big Horn with 83 cases.

Syphilis is especially dangerous for women who are pregnant or may become pregnant. Syphilis can cause stillbirth or result in serious, lifelong disabilities if the baby survives. To prevent syphilis in babies, all pregnant women need early prenatal care and syphilis testing. If a pregnant person has syphilis, she needs to be treated to cure her disease and prevent her baby from contracting syphilis.

Since Jan. 1, Montana has recorded 15 congenital syphilis cases statewide, including one that resulted in stillbirth. Congenital cases are preventable if the pregnant person gets tested and treated appropriately.

People often don't know they are infected unless they get tested. Syphilis may cause small, usually painless sores on or near the genitals, in or around the mouth. The sores will go away, but the bacteria remains in the body. Later in the disease, there may be a rash anywhere on the body. Again, these symptoms normally disappear without treatment but the bacteria keeps multiplying in the body. Some people develop neurosyphilis, which damages the brain or nerves and may cause vision and hearing loss and psychiatric disorders.

Infected people can spread syphilis to their sexual partners.

A simple finger-stick blood test will tell your healthcare provider whether or not you have syphilis. Some providers, including RiverStone Health, offer rapid tests that return results in about 10 minutes.

If a person tests positive, they can receive a dose of antibiotic immediately. Usually, one dose cures the disease if it is in the first year of infection.

Public health professionals at RiverStone Health are available Monday through Friday to answer questions about testing and treatment for syphilis and other STIs. Please contact us at 406-247-3396 or [phs.info@riverstonehealth.org](mailto:phs.info@riverstonehealth.org).

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