

# Yellowstone County's surge in syphilis cases

By Stacie Pannell

A surge in U.S. syphilis cases has prompted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to recommend additional precautions for people in counties with a high rate of cases. Yellowstone County is one of those high-rate places.

Cases of this sexually transmitted infection are being diagnosed every week in Montana's most populous county. Sexually active men and women of all ages have been infected.

As a state, Montana has the seventh highest rate of syphilis among women of childbearing age (15-44 years). Montana's rate is nearly 30 times the national average, according to the CDC.

## Congenital cases

If a pregnant person is infected and not treated, she can infect her unborn baby. Syphilis can result in death or severe, lifelong disabilities for the child. Yellowstone County had zero cases of congenital syphilis for decades – until we had two cases in 2022 and four cases in 2023, including one stillbirth.

In teens and adults, syphilis can cause an array of problems such as blurred vision, eye pain, loss of vision, loss of hearing, ringing in the ears, difficulty in balance and impaired mental function.

Syphilis is treatable. Early diagnosis and treatment result in the best outcome for patients.

Anyone who is sexually active can contract syphilis. In Yellowstone County and other counties with high infection rates, the CDC recommends that all sexually active people be tested for syphilis at least once a year. The only exception to needing a yearly test would be persons in a mutually monogamous long-term relationship who have previously tested negative.

Testing is crucial for pregnant people to protect their health and the life of their unborn baby. All pregnant people should be tested at the first prenatal visit. Some will need testing again during the third trimester (28 weeks gestation) and at delivery. This includes people who live in Yellowstone County and other areas with high rates of syphilis.

Syphilis most often spreads from person-to-person by direct contact with a syphilitic sore, known as a chancre. A new infection results in a chancre between 10 and 90 days after exposure. A lab test would show positive for syphilis about that time, too.

The chancre or sore is usually (but not always) firm, round, and painless. It appears at the location where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts three to six weeks and heals regardless of whether a person receives treatment. However, the infection will progress if the person does not receive treatment.

After the sore disappears, some people get a rash that may be anywhere on the body. The rash also disappears, so people don't always seek medical care. That allows the bacteria to spread, potentially causing damage to nerves, eyesight or hearing that cannot be reversed.

### **Antibiotic treatment**

A fingerstick is all that is required for a rapid test that can help diagnose this disease. Cases caught early may require just one dose of antibiotic.

People who are diagnosed after they have been infected for more than a year will need multiple doses of specific antibiotics over a period of weeks. In advanced cases, the patient may need intravenous antibiotic treatment in a hospital.

Your personal medical provider should be able to test you for syphilis and order effective treatment if the test is positive. Rapid testing and outpatient treatment also are available from RiverStone Health where your health information is strictly confidential. If you have questions about syphilis, testing or treatment, call RiverStone Health Public Health at 406-247-3305.

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