

Syphilis resurges: Worst Montana outbreak in 74 years

By Kelly Gardner

When people hear about syphilis, many think of olden times when healthcare and basic hygiene were essentially nonexistent. Some even envision the pirate Blackbeard, who was believed to have lost his mind because of a syphilis infection (and, possibly, treatment with mercury). The harsh truth, however, is that not only does syphilis still exist, but cases are rapidly increasing.

Statewide, Montana reported 617 cases of syphilis in 2022. That is the highest annual total since the state had 633 cases in 1948.

In 2022, Yellowstone County saw a 534% increase over the previous five-year average – a total of 149 cases. So far in 2023, there have been 70 cases, with the number increasing almost daily. By the end of the year, it's likely that there will be over 200 cases diagnosed in Yellowstone County.

So why the major increase? One problem is that people don't realize syphilis still exists. They aren't watching out for it. We're generally more familiar with chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV (which all still exist), but aren't as aware of the signs and symptoms of syphilis.

Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, resources normally dedicated to sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing and treatment were diverted to pandemic response. STIs spread because many patients weren't seen in a timely manner.

Signs and symptoms

Signs and symptoms of syphilis can be sneaky; they usually disappear on their own without treatment. However, the bacteria remains in the body, causing damage until it's killed with antibiotics. One of the most common signs of syphilis is small, usually painless, sores that are often on the genitalia or in/around the mouth. Many people also develop a rash that appears on the palms of hands, soles of feet or across the abdomen. Again, these symptoms will normally disappear without treatment but the bacteria are still present in the body and growing in numbers.

Testing and treatment

Treatment for the first two stages of syphilis is a single dose of an antibiotic called Bicillin (a version of penicillin). Later stages of syphilis require three doses of the same medication. If someone has an allergy to penicillin, other antibiotics are available.

Sometimes people develop an advanced form of the disease called "neurosyphilis," which is still treatable with antibiotics. Although the disease is curable, damage it caused to the brain might not be reversible.

Testing is especially important for pregnant women. Syphilis can be treated safely during pregnancy. Untreated syphilis in the pregnant woman can result in stillbirth or the baby being born with serious health problems. Testing early in pregnancy is crucial to the health of the infant and mother.

Everyone who is sexually active is at risk for syphilis, regardless of age. If you may have been exposed or have symptoms, see a healthcare provider right away and request to be tested.

RiverStone Health Public Health is 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.

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