

NEW MEXICO HEALTH ALERT NETWORK (HAN) ALERT

Syphilis Testing in Pregnancy to Prevent Congenital Syphilis

October 5, 2022

Background:

In the United States, cases of congenital syphilis have increased every year since 2013. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 2,148 cases of congenital syphilis in 2020, including 149 congenital syphilis-related stillbirths and infant deaths. The national congenital syphilis rate of 57.3 cases per 100,000 live births in 2020 represents a 254% increase compared with 2016.

These increases mirror increases in syphilis cases among reproductive aged women.¹ Syphilis during pregnancy is associated with miscarriage, stillbirth, perinatal death, preterm delivery, and congenital infection.

New Mexico Situation:

New Mexico has seen a sharp increase in the number of congenital syphilis cases since 2017 and ranked first in the US for rate of congenital syphilis in 2020 (the most recent finalized CDC data).² There was one congenital syphilis case reported in 2017, 10 cases in 2018, 26 cases in 2019, and 42 cases in 2020.³

Dr. David R. Scrase, Acting Cabinet Secretary of the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH), renewed the Public Health Order which directs all clinicians serving pregnant persons to conduct syphilis testing according to CDC best practices. Appropriate testing allows for timely treatment which is the best chance to prevent transmission.⁴

Direction for Healthcare Providers:

1. Testing:

All medical practitioners shall perform the following syphilis testing with consent from the patient:

- a. Syphilis testing in both the 1st trimester (or initial prenatal visit) and 3rd trimester (28-32 weeks gestational age) of pregnancy.
- b. Syphilis testing at delivery.
- c. Syphilis testing for all pregnant people who present to urgent care or an emergency room if the patient has not received prior prenatal care.
- d. Syphilis testing of any woman with an intrauterine fetal demise at any gestational age.

¹ [National Overview \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/default.htm)

² <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/default.htm>

³ <https://www.nmhealth.org/about/phd/idb/std/>

⁴ NM Public Health Order

- e. Syphilis testing for all pregnant people at correctional facilities, including prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers, at the intervals listed above.

2. Consider syphilis in all pregnant persons:

Most people who gave birth to babies with congenital syphilis received limited or no prenatal care. Therefore, *every health encounter* with a pregnant person can be considered an opportunity to test for syphilis, especially in people who are *high risk* or not yet engaged in prenatal care.

Maternal risk factors for syphilis during pregnancy include⁵:

- sex with multiple partners,
- sex in conjunction with drug use or transactional sex,
- late entry to prenatal care (i.e., first visit during the second trimester or later) or no prenatal care,
- methamphetamine or heroin use,
- incarceration of the woman or her partner,
- unstable housing or homelessness

3. Treatment:

Penicillin G is the only known effective antimicrobial for treating fetal infection and preventing congenital syphilis. Pregnant people with penicillin allergies should be desensitized and treated with penicillin according to the dosage schedules appropriate for the stage of syphilis. Complete information on syphilis treatment can be found in the CDC 2021 STD Treatment Guidelines: [Syphilis During Pregnancy - STI Treatment Guidelines \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis-pregnancy).

4. Prevention:

Congenital syphilis can be prevented with timely screening and prompt treatment. During pregnancy care, providers should obtain information concerning ongoing risk behaviors and treatment of sex partners to assess the risk for reinfection. Prevent reinfection of pregnant women by treating all sex partners.

5. Reporting:

New Mexico law requires that syphilis infections be reported to NMDOH within 24 hours of diagnosis. Fax completed reporting forms to the NMDOH STD Program at (505) 476-3638. Reporting forms: <https://nmhealth.org/publication/view/form/1594/>

NMDOH STD program information: <https://nmhealth.org/about/phd/idb/std/>

Reporting allows cases to be investigated and partners contacted, which is essential to stopping syphilis transmission and preventing reinfection. NMDOH has more than 25 Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) who are certified to conduct confidential syphilis case investigations.

If you have further questions or need more information, contact an Infectious Disease Expert, or call the NMDOH STD program at (505) 476-3636.

New Mexico Health Alert Network: To register for the New Mexico Health Alert Network, click the following link to go directly to the HAN registration page <https://nm.readyop.com/fs/4cjZ/10b2>. Please provide all information requested to begin receiving important health alerts and advisories.

⁵ [Syphilis During Pregnancy - STI Treatment Guidelines \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis-pregnancy)

EPIDEMIOLOGY AND RESPONSE

1190 St. Francis Drive, N1320 • Santa Fe, New Mexico • 87502-6110
(505) 827-0006 • FAX: (505) 827-2110 • www.nmhealth.org