

Alaska Public Health Advisory

October 23, 2018

Update on Alaska's Ongoing Syphilis Outbreak

The purpose of this health alert network message is to update health care providers on the ongoing syphilis outbreak and invite clinicians to participate in a brief online survey to help control the outbreak.

As of October 22, 75 cases of infectious syphilis have been reported to the Alaska Section of Epidemiology (SOE) during 2018 (Figure). This is the largest syphilis outbreak to have occurred in Alaska in at least four decades. Most (85%, 64/75) of the cases occurred in Anchorage, and 88% (66/75) of the cases were in males. The ages of infected persons ranged from 18–76 years (Table). Of the males, 83% (55/66) reported being gay, bisexual, or other men who have sex with men (MSM). Of the 9 reported infectious syphilis cases in women, 8 were of childbearing age and 2 *were pregnant* at the time of diagnosis. A probable case of congenital syphilis was diagnosed in an infant born in March 2018.

SOE recently requested assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help with response efforts. The outbreak response team is working to gather information from health care providers, patients, patient records, and community members to better understand the factors that are contributing to the outbreak.

If you are a clinician who cares for patients with STDs, please complete the following brief, anonymous survey to help control this outbreak: <https://tinyurl.com/y757dbnp>

Summary Recommendations

- Obtain a thorough sexual history on all patients who are screened for STDs including the number and gender of sexual partners.
- Perform non-treponemal (RPR) and treponemal (FTA, TPPA, or equivalent) tests on persons with suspected syphilis.
- Promptly treat patients with primary, secondary, or early latent syphilis with Bicillin L-A (benzathine penicillin G) 2.4 million units in a single intramuscular dose.
- Perform a neurologic exam and a cerebrospinal fluid evaluation via lumbar puncture on all patients with syphilis and neurologic, ophthalmologic, or audiologic symptoms.
- Offer gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV testing to all patients with suspected syphilis infection.
- Strongly encourage infected patients to participate in confidential partner notification services.
- Screen **all** sexually active MSM at least annually for syphilis, HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and hepatitis C; screen sexually active MSM every 3–6 months if they engage in high-risk sexual activity (e.g., multiple or anonymous sex partners).
- Test for pregnancy in all women of childbearing age who are diagnosed with syphilis.
- Screen **all** pregnant women for syphilis during their first prenatal visit, and rescreen early in their 3rd trimester *and at delivery if at high risk* (e.g., multiple partners, recent history of STD). Pregnant women at increased risk of syphilis infection may be screened more frequently.
- Report all suspected and confirmed cases of syphilis to the Alaska Section of Epidemiology, HIV/STD Program within 5 business days, or immediately when possible. Report via fax at 907-561-4239 or telephone at 907-269-8000.
- Contact SOE staff for consultation, staging, and partner management at 907-269-8000.

References

1. Alaska Public Health Advisory. Syphilis in Alaska (March 4, 2018). Available at: http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/Documents/phan/AKPHAN_20180314_Syphilis_in_Alaska.pdf
2. Alaska Section of Epidemiology Bulletin. “Syphilis Update.” No. 4, May 10, 2018. Available at: http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2018_04.pdf

For more information

- National STD Curriculum (STD Modules Quick Reference with information on epidemiology, clinical management and photos; CNE/CME credit available) <https://www.std.uw.edu/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Sexually Transmitted Diseases website: <https://www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm>
- Syphilis: A Providers Guide to Treatment and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/Syphilis-Pocket-Guide-FINAL-508.pdf>
- Alaska Section of Epidemiology HIV/STD Program webpage: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/hivstd/Pages/default.aspx>

Figure. Number of Confirmed Primary, Secondary and Early Latent Infectious Syphilis Cases by Month of Diagnosis — Alaska, January 1–October 22, 2018 (N=75)

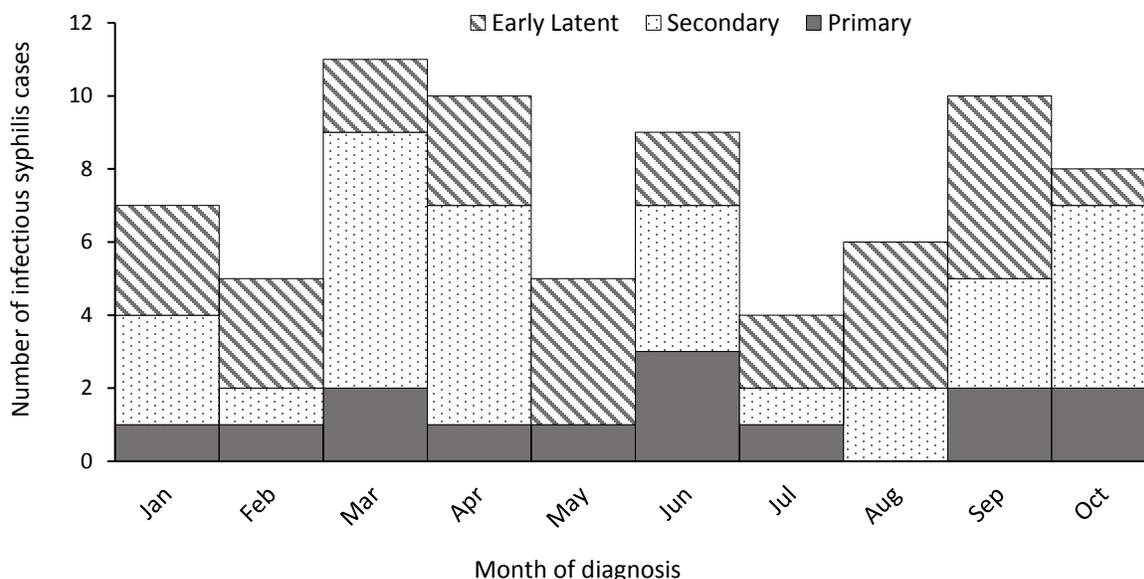


Table. Syphilis Cases by Age Group (Years) — Alaska, January 1–October 22, 2018 (N=75)

Age Group	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–54	55–64	65+
# of Cases	3	8	20	8	7	7	16	5	1