

# **IDPH Launches New Provider Phone Line In Response To Alarming Increase In Babies Born With Congenital Syphilis**

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**CHICAGO** – Acting to address a sharp increase in congenital syphilis cases among newborns, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) is urging healthcare providers to conduct more testing for the sexually transmitted infection in advance of birth and is launching a new phone line to provide clinical consultation for providers who treat pregnant patients and newborns.

The service called the Perinatal Syphilis Warmline (at 1-800-439-4079) comes in response to an almost tripling in the number of congenital syphilis cases in Illinois since

2021. There were 29 cases in the state in 2020, 50 cases in 2021 and 84 cases in 2022. Calls will be answered within a day.

“The best way to protect Illinois’s babies from congenital syphilis is for pregnant people to get tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections before birth,” said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “These rising rates of congenital syphilis are alarming, and IDPH is responding with new education tools and support services to help providers who care for those who are pregnant and their newborns.”

Congenital syphilis cases have been surging in recent years both nationally and in Illinois. Since 2000, national data shows an increase in syphilis of 459%. Specifically for pregnant people and their infants, congenital syphilis has increased 203% since 2017.

Syphilis is an infection caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum* and is spread through sexual contact. Congenital syphilis occurs when a pregnant person with untreated syphilis passes the infection to their infant during pregnancy. It can cause permanent damage or death to an infant. Before birth, syphilis can cause a miscarriage, premature delivery, or low birth weight. Up to 40% of babies with congenital syphilis may be stillborn or die from the infection. A baby with a syphilis infection may not have signs or symptoms of the infection at the time of birth. But if untreated, the baby may develop serious complications such as cataracts, deafness, or seizures and, it could also lead to death in infancy or childhood.

IDPH has issued [a letter to healthcare providers](#) in the state calling for increased awareness and testing for the syphilis.

IDPH is encouraging medical providers to increase syphilis testing of all individuals - especially pregnant people - in any medical setting, including urgent care, emergency departments, and all prenatal care settings. Prenatal health care providers are required by Illinois law to screen all who are pregnant for syphilis infection at the first prenatal visit and early in the third trimester. Additional testing at the time of delivery is also recommended in high-risk settings.

The expansion of the Illinois Perinatal HIV Hotline to include the Perinatal Syphilis Warmline will provide clinical consultation for health care providers for syphilis in pregnancy and the newborn period, coordination of public health record searches to obtain prior syphilis testing and treatment information, and assistance with mandatory reporting. The warmline will be available Monday- Friday with messages returned in one business day.

Reducing syphilis cases (especially congenital syphilis) has the additional challenge of the current Bicillin shortage, the only medication that treats syphilis in pregnancy in

children. Until this shortage is alleviated, it is critical that providers prioritize Bicillin inventory for treatment of those for whom there are no other treatment options: infants and those who are pregnant. Providers should consult the [CDC treatment guidelines](#) to ensure adequate care. Those who are pregnant should talk to your health care provider about testing and any needed treatment as you prepare for your baby's arrival.