



PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT-SYPHILIS

March 4, 2009

Dear Health Care Colleague,

Cuyahoga County is in the midst of a syphilis (*Treponema pallidum*) outbreak. The Cleveland Department of Public Health (CDPH), the Cuyahoga County Board of Health (CCBH), and the Shaker Heights Health Department (SHHD) urge Greater Cleveland medical providers to screen all sexually active patients, particularly youth, for syphilis.

This outbreak began in June of 2007 and persists to the present. From January to November 2008, there have been 94 early (primary, secondary, and early latent) syphilis cases in the County, which is a 135% increase from this time last year. On average, 10% were diagnosed with primary syphilis, 50% as secondary and 40% as early latent syphilis. The prevalence of syphilis has been low enough over the last several years that many providers have never seen symptomatic syphilis. These findings require that all Cuyahoga County clinicians raise our index of clinical suspicion and our tendency to conduct primary screening. In those reporting symptoms, genital lesions were identified in 27%, a rash on palms or soles of feet in 30%, generalized rash in 21%, and condyloma lata (raised skin scaling) or mucous patches in 18%. Only 3% reported swollen nodes. Lesions were present in nearly all primary and early latent cases.

Recent cases are occurring in two populations: 1) African-American heterosexual males and females, and 2) men who have sex with men and bisexual men regardless of race or ethnicity. **Youth, ages 14 to 24, are of particular concern, reflecting one in four new cases.** There have been 16 new cases of syphilis among teens 14 to 19 from January through November 2008, a 300% increase since the same period for 2007. In addition, Chlamydia and gonorrhea rates are highest among this age group.

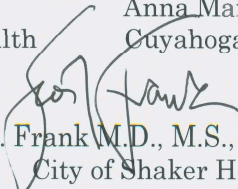
CDPH, CCBH, and SHHD urge medical providers to screen all sexually active patients for syphilis and to adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention STD Treatment Guidelines:

- Any patient presenting with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) should be screened for syphilis by obtaining a serum RPR.
- All HIV positive patients should have an annual screening RPR. More frequent screening (every 3 to 6 months) is also recommended for those with high-risk behaviors such as having multiple sex partners, engaging in any unprotected intercourse and/or illicit drug use.
- All pregnant women should have a screening RPR obtained at first prenatal visit and again at 28 weeks gestation, and during the third trimester if the patient has any high-risk behaviors. Any woman who delivers without prenatal care needs to have an RPR drawn at delivery.

We require your support in order to help make Cuyahoga County a healthier community. Please contact CDPH's Partner Notification and Referral Services at (216)664-7080 for further information on syphilis or to make a communicable disease referral.


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