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Rise in syphilis cases in newborns causes concern *DOH orders increase in syphilis testing of all pregnant women to prevent congenital syphilis in babies*

SANTA FE – The New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) renewed a 2021 Public Health Order (PHO) to protect newborns from syphilis on September 30, 2022. The PHO mandates that all medical providers serving pregnant women follow best practices by testing all pregnant women for syphilis multiple times.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report a nationwide increase in cases. In 2020, there were 2,148 cases of congenital syphilis, 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 percent increase compared with 2016.

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

“Congenital syphilis is a completely preventable disease” said **David R. Scrase, M.D. acting secretary for DOH**. “Treatment is available and affordable. Every encounter with a pregnant woman is an opportunity to test for syphilis, especially in people who are high risk or not yet engaged in prenatal care. We must talk, test and immediately treat those who test positive for syphilis with penicillin to prevent the transmission.”

Additionally, DOH plans on reintroducing a bill in the next legislative session to amend Section 24-1-10 NMSA 1978 (the Public Health Act) regarding testing pregnant women for syphilis to align with CDC guidelines. This will ensure that guidelines are current and reflect best practices, rather than requiring ongoing orders from the New Mexico Secretary of Health. [SB184](#) failed in the 2021 session.

Congenital syphilis is a disease that occurs when a mother with syphilis passes the infection on to her baby during pregnancy. This presents a significant public

health threat because it can lead to serious birth defects, miscarriage and infant death. Congenital syphilis and these complications are entirely preventable with timely testing and treatment.

All medical providers serving pregnant women must continue to follow these best practices from the CDC, upon consent of the patient:

- Syphilis testing for all pregnant women in their first trimester (or initial prenatal visit) and third trimester (28-32 weeks gestational age).
- Syphilis testing for all pregnant women again at delivery.
- Syphilis testing for all pregnant women who present to an urgent care center or an emergency room if the patient has not received prior prenatal care.
- Syphilis testing of any woman who has had a miscarriage at any gestational age.
- Syphilis testing for all pregnant women at correctional facilities, including prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers, at the intervals and events ordered herein.

Syphilis is a reportable sexually transmitted disease (STD) with cases tracked by DOH.

DOH encourages all pregnant women to get tested for syphilis as soon as the first prenatal visit. You can protect yourself and prevent future complications with your baby with a simple test. If syphilis is detected, treatment can be as easy as one visit. Syphilis testing is available from medical providers, as well as for free at any NMDOH Public Health Office. Persons interested in testing can find a location near them using www.nmstdtest.org.

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NMDOH

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The Department of Health works to promote health and wellness, improve health outcomes, and deliver services to all New Mexicans. As New Mexico's largest state agency, DOH offers public health services in all 33 counties and collaborates with 23 Native American tribes, Pueblos and nations.