



Northwestern  
Health Unit

www.nwhu.on.ca

March 12, 2019

### Medical Alert – Syphilis Update

The infectious syphilis outbreak in the region is ongoing and is linked to the outbreak in ([CBC 2019](#); [WRHA 2018](#)) where there have been cases of congenital syphilis. Within the catchment area of Northwestern Health Unit, syphilis cases have been reported in Kenora, Dryden, Fort Frances and a few smaller communities. During this outbreak, there have been no cases of congenital syphilis reported to Northwestern Health Unit.

#### **NEW RECOMMENDATION:**

Considering the social linkages between Northwestern Ontario and Winnipeg, the devastating health effects of congenital syphilis, and the challenges in identifying whether a person is high risk, it is recommended that:

- **ALL pregnant women in the catchment area of Northwestern Health Unit should be screened for syphilis at three time points during this outbreak: their first prenatal visit, between 28 to 32 weeks gestation, and at delivery;** prenatal screening for syphilis, in addition to these three time points, is at the discretion of the physician and should be considered based on ongoing risk factors and signs and symptoms.

This recommendation has been developed in consultation with Public Health Ontario and similar recommendations have been made in [Minnesota](#) and some parts of [Manitoba](#).

(Continued on page 2)

### **Additional Recommendations:**

- Provide counselling that transmission does not require sexual intercourse and can occur with oral sex or contact with a syphilis ulcer that the person may not be aware of; and that there is a potential risk of transmission with the sharing of needles
- Promote the importance of condoms and dental dams and not sharing needles; these are available from NWHU at no charge for distribution through your clinic.
- Screen for syphilis in patients with compatible symptoms or risk factors including a primary chancre, maculopapular rash involving the palms and soles, unprotected sex with a casual or anonymous partners, multiple sexual partners, substance misuse, incarceration, homeless or unstable housing, those requesting STI testing, those with a confirmed or suspected STI, men who have sex with men, or reports having a sexual partner with any of the above risk factors.
- If there are compatible symptoms or risk factors, test also for HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, chlamydia and gonorrhea.
- Screen any woman delivering a stillborn at 20 weeks gestation or later for syphilis at the time of delivery.
- Treatment for sexually transmitted infections can be made available at no charge; please contact NWHU to arrange for free medication through your clinic.
- Notify NWHU if you suspect a diagnosis of syphilis

### **Resources for Health Care Providers**

Information and supports for health care providers and the most recent epidemiological report are available at the [NWHU - Syphilis](#) webpage.

**Sioux Lookout health care providers**, please note that detailed communication and direction to nursing staff in the Sioux Lookout Zone First Nation communities from First Nations and Inuit Health (FNIH) is in the process of being developed.

**Dr. Kit Young-Hoon**  
Medical Officer of Health  
Northwestern Health Unit  
(807) 468-3147  
(807) 468-7109 (after hours)  
[kyoungphoon@nwhu.on.ca](mailto:kyoungphoon@nwhu.on.ca)