



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Health Department Reports Substantial Increase in Syphilis Cases

PITTSBURGH – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported an unprecedented high for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) in the United States. The Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) reported similar increases, but a particularly large increase in primary and secondary syphilis cases in 2015.

In 2014, Allegheny County reported a total of 68 primary and secondary cases. In 2015, there were a total of 129 primary and secondary cases reported, which is a 90% increase from 2014. Ninety-three percent (93%) of these infections were among men, the majority of whom were men who have sex with men (MSM). Forty-five percent (45%) of individuals with primary or secondary syphilis were HIV-positive. Also, 62% of the individuals in these cases are under the age of 30.

“There has been a resurgence of syphilis in the United States since 2011, with increases noted particularly among MSM,” said ACHD Director Dr. Karen Hacker. “In this age of social media and anonymous sex online applications, we are concerned that individuals are not protecting themselves and are unaware of the STD status of their partners. It has also become more difficult to conduct successful investigations and insure that both the patient and their partners are treated given the anonymity.”

Syphilis is a STD caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, and is passed from person to person through vaginal, anal or oral sex. In the early phases, infected persons may experience a sore on their genitalia or in the mouth or a rash, often on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. Syphilis can also be associated with very mild symptoms or none at all.

Untreated, syphilis can lead to long-term health complications. Syphilis may increase a person’s chance of acquiring HIV. In pregnant women, syphilis can cause stillbirths, neonatal deaths and congenital malformations. Syphilis is curable with antibiotics, and early diagnosis and treatment can prevent complications.

To reduce the risk of syphilis, ACHD is urging all sexually active men and women to follow safer sexual practices – reduce the number of sex partners, use latex condoms, engage in monogamous long term relationships, and confirm that your partner has negative test results for STDs. Avoiding risky sexual behavior will reduce one’s risk of becoming infected with syphilis and other STDs such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV. Individuals who are at risk – those having multiple sexual partners, anonymous sexual activity, and MSM – should be regularly screened for STDs and HIV.

Harold Wiesenfeld, MD, Medical Director of the Health Department's STD/HIV Program recommends that health care providers in Allegheny County should ask their patients about sexual risk behaviors and screen at-risk patients, given the increase in syphilis in the region.

Free screening and treatment for syphilis and other STDs are available at the Allegheny County Health Department's STD Clinic at 3441 Forbes Avenue, Oakland. For more information, call the STD Program at **412-578-8081**.

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