



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | 02/02/16

Jump in syphilis cases among American Indian women alarms health officials

Health officials are concerned over a large increase in syphilis cases among Minnesota's American Indian women. Preliminary data for 2015 show 28 syphilis cases were reported among American Indian women compared to five cases in 2014.

"This is the largest increase among women of any racial or ethnic group in 2015," said Dr. Ed Ehlinger, Minnesota Commissioner of Health. "We are working with our partners in the American Indian communities to address this increase and are taking the steps needed to curb it."

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that can lead to serious health problems. In the most severe cases, untreated syphilis can lead to blindness, brain damage, heart problems and even death. Pregnant women, when infected and untreated, can pass syphilis onto their babies, leading to severe and life-threatening conditions in infants. Syphilis in pregnancy can also lead to stillbirth or premature birth.

"Although these reported cases in American Indian women have occurred mainly in Minneapolis and St. Paul, we are concerned there may be more cases statewide," said Ehlinger. "The key is to get more people at risk of infection to get tested and for health care providers to do more screenings. Syphilis can easily be cured with medication."

Health officials noted it is important for health care providers to take a complete sexual history and test women with risk factors for syphilis. Risk factors include drug use, multiple sex partners, infection with other sexually transmitted diseases and prior syphilis infection. Sexual partners of infected patients need to be tested and treated as well. All pregnant women should be tested at **three** points during their pregnancy: the first visit with their doctor, the 28th week of pregnancy and at delivery.

"All women and their sexual partners can play a vital role in lowering the chances of getting or spreading syphilis," said Ehlinger. "Learning about the symptoms and practicing prevention will make a difference."

Syphilis is spread through direct contact with a painless sore called a chancre during unprotected oral, anal and vaginal sex. The chancre can appear on the mouth, genitals or anus.

Jump in cases among American Indian women alarms health officials

A body rash may occur weeks to months after the chancre. Consistent and correct use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of spreading or getting syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases including HIV infection.

Call the Minnesota Family Planning & STD Hotline, 1-800-78-FACTS, for testing sites in your area. Get resources about syphilis for health providers and consumers on the Minnesota Department of Health website:

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/syphilis/index.html>

-MDH-

* * *

For more information, contact:

Doug Schultz

Minnesota Department of Health

Communications

doug.schultz@state.mn.us

651-201-4993