



State of California—Health and Human Services Agency
California Department of Public Health

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GAVIN NEWSOM
Governor

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Subject: Call to expand HIV and syphilis testing for pregnant women

Dear Colleague,

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) requests your assistance in responding to alarming increases in congenital syphilis and perinatal HIV transmissions in California. In 2019, 446 congenital syphilis cases were reported in California, the highest number of cases since 1993. In 2020 there were also six perinatal HIV transmissions in California, compared to four in 2019 and three in 2018. Most of the birthing parents of children with perinatal HIV were co-infected with or had a recent history of syphilis, one of the indicators for offering HIV prevention medication (i.e., Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis or PrEP), highlighting the need for an integrated approach to these devastating and preventable infections. In addition, significant racial disparities have been observed, as rates of congenital syphilis are significantly higher among Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native infants than the statewide rate.

Perinatal HIV transmission and congenital syphilis can be prevented with timely testing and treatment. A common risk factor, however, is receiving late or no prenatal care. HIV and syphilis testing and treatment must expand beyond prenatal care clinics to other settings serving women at elevated risk for HIV and syphilis. CDPH requests your assistance to implement the following policies and best practices to Screen, Treat and Prevent, and Prepare for perinatal transmissions including, but are not limited to, the following:

Screen

- **Confirm HIV and syphilis status of all pregnant patients receiving care or services at emergency departments; urgent care clinics; jails; mental health, drug treatment, and syringe services programs; and street medicine or homeless outreach programs** with documented lab results or by providing opt-out HIV and syphilis testing.



- Screen all pregnant patients for HIV at least once¹ and for syphilis three times during pregnancy: the first test should be as early as possible (during the first trimester), the second test should be during the third trimester (ideally between 28–32 weeks' gestation), and the third test should be at delivery^{2,3}. Pregnant women who initially test negative for HIV but are at higher risk should have repeat HIV testing during third trimester or at delivery if not tested during 3rd trimester.

Treat and Prevent Syphilis and HIV

- **Pregnant women with syphilis should be treated with the recommended penicillin regimen for their stage of infection as soon as possible.**
- **Infants born to mothers with syphilis during pregnancy should be evaluated and treated for congenital syphilis** per recommendations in [CDC's Sexually Transmitted Infection Treatment Guidelines \(link here\)](#).
- **Pregnant women newly diagnosed with HIV or previously diagnosed with HIV but not on antiretroviral therapy should start treatment as soon as possible.** Pregnant women with HIV should receive antiretroviral therapy throughout pregnancy (including the intrapartum period). Pregnant women on antiretroviral therapy but not virally suppressed should have their therapy urgently optimized to achieve viral suppression.
- **Infants born to mothers with HIV should immediately receive appropriate antiretroviral medications to prevent perinatal HIV transmission⁴.** Local health departments, Ryan White clinics, and CDPH can help facilitate rapid consultations for HIV care. The [National Perinatal HIV Hotline](#) (1-888-448-8765) provides free clinical consultation on all aspects of perinatal HIV care.

¹ Repeat HIV testing in the third trimester is recommended for pregnant women who are at increased risk of acquiring HIV, including those receiving care in facilities that have an HIV incidence of ≥ 1 case per 1,000 pregnant women per year. Repeat HIV testing is also recommended for pregnant women with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or with signs and symptoms of acute HIV infection.

² All infants and mothers should be tested for syphilis at delivery unless there is low risk for infection and third trimester testing is negative.

³ [Expanded Syphilis Screening Recommendations for the Prevention of Congenital Syphilis: Guidelines for California Medical Providers 2020](#). Available at: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/Expanded-Syphilis-Screening-Recommendations.pdf>

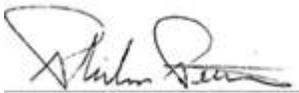
⁴ Panel on Treatment of Pregnant Women with HIV Infection and Prevention of Perinatal Transmission. [Recommendations for the Use of Antiretroviral Drugs in Pregnant Women with HIV Infection and Interventions to Reduce Perinatal HIV Transmission in the United States](#). Available at https://clinicalinfo.hiv.gov/sites/default/files/guidelines/documents/Perinatal_GL.pdf.

Prepare

- **Refer and navigate all women diagnosed with bacterial STIs (syphilis or gonorrhea) for HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) which can safely be provided during pregnancy.**
- **Birth hospitals should have expedited HIV and syphilis testing available 24 hours a day with results available within 1 hour** during labor or delivery for women with undocumented HIV or syphilis status, including women who were not retested in the third trimester.
- If HIV or syphilis results are positive, a protocol should be in place to provide immediate intrapartum antiretroviral prophylaxis (HIV) or penicillin G treatment (syphilis) to the mother.
- Pregnant patients with HIV or syphilis may require intensive case management to ensure that they have access to treatment and care. Contact your local health department (and [Ryan White clinic](#) if HIV) to assist with navigation and support services. Preventing perinatal HIV and congenital syphilis are critical priorities for public health in California.

Early diagnosis and treatment can prevent perinatal HIV transmission and congenital syphilis but can only be achieved if testing and treatment are expanded beyond traditional settings. Thank you for your work to improve the sexual health of all Californians. Together, we can end these epidemics and eliminate perinatal HIV transmission and congenital syphilis. Additional information and resources are appended below.

Sincerely,



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Center for Infectious Diseases
California Department of Public Health



Kathleen Jacobson, MD
Chief, STD Control Branch
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California Department of Public Health

Additional Resources

Perinatal HIV

- [Perinatal HIV Exposure Reporting \(PHER\) – please complete this case report for perinatal HIV exposures:](#)
<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/guidelines/cdc-hiv-perinatal-hiv-exposure-report-form-2019.pdf>
- [Perinatal HIV Clinical Guidelines:](#)
<https://clinicalinfo.hiv.gov/en/guidelines/perinatal/whats-new-guidelines>
- [Perinatal HIV Clinical Consultation center:](#) <https://nccc.ucsf.edu/clinician-consultation/perinatal-hiv-aids/> or call (888) 448-8765.
- [Fetal Infant Mortality Review/HIV Prevention Methodology National Resource Center.](#) <https://www.fimrhiv.org/methodology.php>

Syphilis/Congenital Syphilis/STDs

- [Expanded Syphilis Screening Recommendations for the Prevention of Congenital Syphilis: 2020](#)
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/Expanded-Syphilis-Screening-Recommendations.pdf>
CDPH full recommendations for syphilis screening expansion in California to prevent congenital syphilis, including evidence, analysis, and implementation
- [CDPH STD Control Branch Congenital Syphilis Webpage](#)
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/CongenitalSyphilis.aspx> CDPH Information and resources on congenital syphilis for providers, patients, and local health jurisdictions
- [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) 2021 STI Treatment Guidelines](#) <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/>
STI Treatment Guidelines, including guidelines for the treatment of syphilis for adults and pregnant patients
- [California Prevention Training Center](#) <https://californiapctc.com/>
Educational opportunities and training materials for syphilis and congenital syphilis
- [STD Clinical Consultation Network](#) <https://stdccn.org/>
Online consultation for questions about the evaluation and management of STDs, including congenital syphilis

Hepatitis C

- [CDPH Perinatal HCV Case Report Form:](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/CDPH%20Document%20Library/ControlledForms/cdph8704.pdf)
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/CDPH%20Document%20Library/ControlledForms/cdph8704.pdf>
- [Association for the Advanced Study of Liver Diseases / Infectious Diseases Society of America Hepatitis C Guidelines – Unique Populations:](https://www.hcvguidelines.org/unique-populations)
<https://www.hcvguidelines.org/unique-populations>

