

# CONGENITAL SYPHILIS FACT SHEET

## What is Congenital Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause serious health problems if it is not treated. Infection develops in stages: primary, secondary, latent and tertiary. [These are described in a separate fact sheet.](#)

Pregnant people who are infected with syphilis can pass the infection to their baby during pregnancy. When a baby gets a syphilis infection in this way, it is called **congenital syphilis**.

Congenital syphilis cases have more than tripled since 1994, with more than 3,800 cases reported in the U.S. in 2022. This is the highest number of infections reported in one year since 1994.

In comparison to other states, Nevada is ranked 10th for primary and secondary syphilis and ranked 6th for congenital syphilis as of 2023. Most congenital syphilis cases in Nevada originate out of Southern Nevada.

## What are the signs and symptoms of congenital syphilis?

Congenital syphilis can cause devastating health problems, including premature birth, low birth weight, and fetal death or newborn death. Babies born with congenital syphilis can have deformed bones, brain and nerve problems (like blindness, deafness, developmental delay, and seizures),

- Severe anemia (low red blood cell count)
- Liver and spleen issues (swelling of these organs)
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes
- Inflammation around the brain and spinal cord (meningitis)
- Sores and skin rashes

Not all babies born with congenital syphilis have signs and symptoms at birth. Health problems due to congenital syphilis usually develop during the first few weeks after delivery, but some of the health problems can happen years later.

How congenital syphilis affects a baby's health depends on how long their pregnant parent had syphilis and whether their pregnant parent got treatment for the infection.<sup>2</sup> Being tested and treated early during pregnancy can help reduce the chances that a baby will be born with health problems from congenital syphilis.

You can see more information about treatment here: [Syphilis During Pregnancy - STI Treatment Guidelines \(cdc.gov\)](#)

## How does congenital syphilis spread?

People who are sexually active can get syphilis, a common and treatable STI. A person can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex.<sup>3</sup>

Syphilis can be passed to an unborn baby (a fetus) through the placenta (a placenta is made up of blood vessels and connects the baby's umbilical cord with the uterus or womb) at any time during a pregnancy. Transmission (the passing of a disease) of syphilis to a baby can also occur during delivery if the baby has direct contact with an infected sore.

Syphilis can spread through contact with the skin rash that usually appears in the later stages of syphilis. If you have open, infected sores that your baby may come in contact with, make sure that you cover the sores and wash your hands and wear gloves before touching and holding your baby.

People with syphilis can breastfeed if the baby or pumping equipment does not touch a sore. If you have sores on your breast, pump or hand-express your milk until the sores heal. If parts of your breast pump also touch the sore(s) while pumping, discard the breast milk.

## How can congenital syphilis be prevented?

### *Preventing syphilis infections among people who may become pregnant*

A person can get syphilis by direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal, or oral sex.<sup>3</sup> You can find out more about the sexually transmitted disease syphilis here: [About Syphilis | Syphilis | CDC](#).

Babies cannot get congenital syphilis if their pregnant parent does not have a syphilis infection while pregnant.

The only way to truly avoid syphilis and all sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to not have vaginal, anal or oral sex. Condom use with every sexual encounter also helps prevent sexually transmitted infections.<sup>4</sup>

- Reduce your risk of getting syphilis before and during a pregnancy by practicing safe sex which means:
  - Using a condom during all sexual encounters leading up to your pregnancy and after becoming pregnant. You can read more about proper condom use here: [Condom Use: An Overview | Condom Use | CDC](#)
  - Having you and your partner tested for syphilis and all sexually transmitted diseases before and after becoming pregnant

If you are sexually active, have an open and honest conversation with your healthcare provider about sexually transmitted diseases and getting tested for all STI's.

### *Test pregnant people for syphilis.*

Getting tested and treated for syphilis can prevent serious health complications for pregnant parents and babies.

All pregnant people should be tested for syphilis during the first healthcare visit for each pregnancy. Even if a person has been tested for syphilis in the past, they should still be tested again with any new pregnancy. Repeat testing at 28 weeks' gestation and at delivery is now the law in the state of Nevada. A syphilis test is needed at the time of delivery to compare with your newborn's syphilis test.

If you test positive for syphilis, you will **need treatment right away. Finish treatment for syphilis as early as possible during pregnancy.** Syphilis is curable with the right antibiotics from your healthcare provider. Follow-up testing by your healthcare provider is necessary to make sure your treatment was successful so that you and your baby are safe at delivery.

Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. It is important that your sexual partner(s) get treated so you do not get reinfected. Even after successful treatment, you can get syphilis again, even during a pregnancy. For this reason, you must continue to take actions that will reduce your risk of getting a new infection, especially during pregnancy.

### **Diagnosing congenital syphilis after the baby is born.**

Your healthcare provider must consider several factors to decide if your baby has congenital syphilis. These factors will include the results of various syphilis tests and whether you received treatment for syphilis during your pregnancy if you were diagnosed with syphilis.

Having syphilis prior to your current pregnancy does not mean you cannot get it again. Even if you had a syphilis infection that was successfully treated, you can still get a new syphilis infection at any time if you do not practice safe sex to reduce your chances of getting another syphilis infection. If you were diagnosed with syphilis early in your pregnancy and were treated, you can get re-infected with syphilis again during the same pregnancy, so following safe sex practices throughout your pregnancy is very important.

Your healthcare provider may also want to test your baby's blood, perform a physical exam of your baby, or do other tests, such as a spinal tap or an x-ray, to determine if your baby has congenital syphilis.

Newborn babies should not be discharged from the hospital unless the pregnant patient has been tested for syphilis at least once during pregnancy, and the results from that test are available.

Any woman who delivers a stillborn infant should be tested for syphilis. See [Pregnant Women](#)

\*Health care providers can find recommendations by the CDC for how to evaluate a baby born to pregnant persons with syphilis here: [Congenital Syphilis - STI Treatment Guidelines \(cdc.gov\)](#).

### **Treating your baby for congenital syphilis**

At birth, a baby with a syphilis infection may not have signs or symptoms of disease. However, if the baby does not receive treatment right away, the baby may develop serious problems within a few weeks. These babies can have health problems, such as cataracts (an eye problem), deafness, or seizures, and can die.

There is treatment for babies with congenital syphilis, and the **treatment needs to be given to the baby right away** to avoid serious health problems and possible death of the infant.

Depending on the results of the baby's tests, they may need antibiotics given to them in the hospital for 10 days. Sometimes, only one injection of antibiotics is needed. Your healthcare provider can explain which treatment your baby needs depending on their test results.<sup>5</sup>

## **References**

1. CDC. About Congenital Syphilis. Syphilis. Published June 6, 2024. Accessed June 27, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/syphilis/about/about-congenital-syphilis.html>
2. Syphilis During Pregnancy - STI Treatment Guidelines. Published July 14, 2021. Accessed June 26, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis-pregnancy.htm>
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4. CDC. Condom Use: An Overview. Condom Use. Published May 9, 2024. Accessed June 27, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/condom-use/index.html>
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