



## **ALERT FOR dermatologists, neurologists, and ophthalmologists Syphilis outbreak across Western Australia**

### **KEY POINTS**

- **Western Australia is experiencing a syphilis outbreak. From Jan 2014 to Dec 2022 the annual number of infectious syphilis notifications increased nine-fold.**
- **Consider and test for syphilis in patients presenting with unexplained rashes, ocular or neurological symptoms.**
- **Testing involves syphilis serology and, where possible, syphilis PCR of an ulcer or lesion. CSF testing may be undertaken for neurological presentations.**

### **Background**

- Historically, most syphilis cases occurred in Aboriginal people from regional and remote communities and gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in metropolitan Perth.
- While these groups continue to be at increased risk, syphilis notifications are occurring across all populations in WA. Populations disproportionately represented in the current outbreak include:
  - people experiencing homelessness or insecure housing
  - people who use methamphetamine and/or inject drugs
  - culturally and linguistically diverse people
  - people aged 16-39 years
  - women of childbearing age (currently 24% of all infectious syphilis notifications in metropolitan Perth and 48% of notifications in regional WA).
- From 2014 to date, 14 congenital syphilis cases have been reported, with four new cases of congenital syphilis reported since 1 January 2022.

### **Test**

- WA Health urges doctors to consider syphilis in patients presenting with unexplained rashes, ocular or neurological symptoms.
- If a person has ulcer(s) or skin lesion, swab the lesion (dry swab) and order a syphilis PCR test, in addition to taking blood for syphilis serology.

### **Treat**

- The first line treatment for syphilis is long-acting penicillin (benzathine penicillin, bicillin L-A). This can be ordered through the Doctor's Bag so that it is available at your practice. See [www.pbs.gov.au/browse/doctorsbag](http://www.pbs.gov.au/browse/doctorsbag).
- The number of treatment doses required varies by stage of disease.
- Patients with neurosyphilis require hospital admission and IV penicillin.

### **Trace**

- Re-infection can occur. Therefore, contact tracing should begin as soon as possible so sexual contacts can be followed-up for testing and treatment. Contact your [local public health unit](#) for assistance with contact tracing.

### **For more information**

- Refer to the [Quick guide for testing and treatment of syphilis](#) for more information.

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Access Clinician Alerts at [ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F\\_I/Health-alerts-infectious-diseases](http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_I/Health-alerts-infectious-diseases)