



Date: October 31, 2019

To: All Medical Care Providers

From: Kismet Baldwin, MD, Health Officer

**Please distribute to all medical providers and other relevant staff in your office.**

## Health Alert

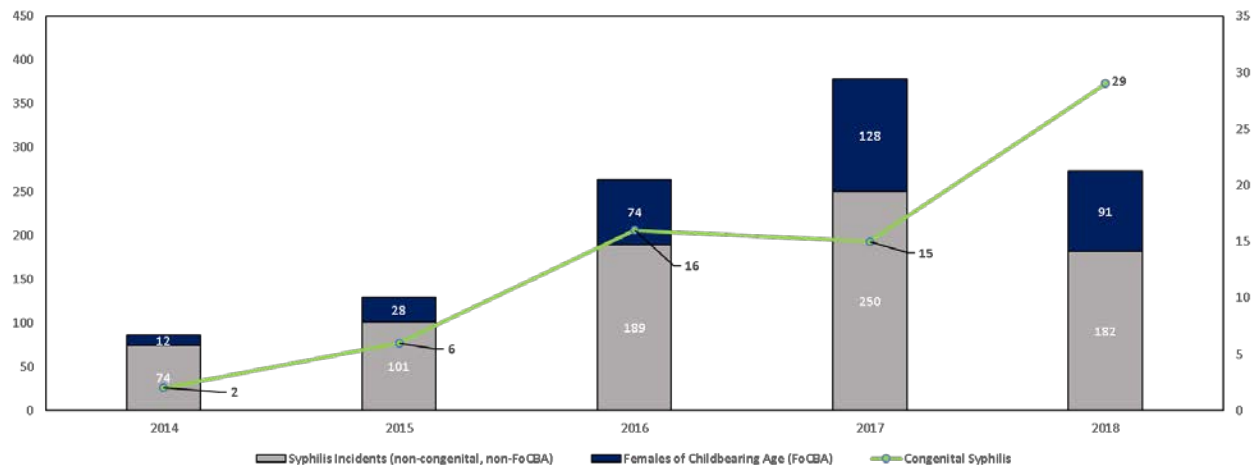
### Ongoing Increase in Syphilis in Women and Congenital Syphilis Calls for Testing Pregnant Women in ED and Primary Care Settings

**Situation:** San Joaquin County continues to experience high rates of syphilis in women of childbearing age and congenital syphilis. In 2018, San Joaquin County had the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate of syphilis in California, the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rate of syphilis in women of childbearing age (15-44 years), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate of congenital syphilis. Syphilis in women has increased dramatically over the last few years and now accounts for 42% of all reported syphilis San Joaquin County. Twenty-nine babies were diagnosed with congenital syphilis in 2018 compared to 15 babies diagnosed with congenital syphilis in 2017 (see figure below). High rates are continuing in 2019. Maternal risk factors include little to no prenatal care, methamphetamine use and homelessness.

**The Health Officer continues the designation of San Joaquin County as a high syphilis morbidity area.** Such a designation calls for all clinicians to follow best practices and guidelines as established by the CDPH, CDC, and USPSTF. These guidelines dictate screening for syphilis three times during ALL pregnancies: at the initial prenatal visit, during EARLY stage of the third trimester, and at delivery.

In addition, most cases of congenital syphilis are in babies whose mothers received little or no prenatal care; it is important that all medical providers inquire about prenatal care and syphilis testing during all interactions with a pregnant woman, regardless of reason for presentation. This includes all visits to the Emergency Department or primary care. At a minimum, syphilis testing should be ordered for pregnant women who have no or inconsistent prenatal care.

Primary/Secondary, and Congenital Syphilis, San Joaquin County 2014-2018



### **ACTIONS REQUESTED OF CLINICIANS:**

**Think** of finding syphilis early, during prenatal visits and whenever interacting with pregnant women especially those with a history of substance use or experiencing homelessness. During this syphilis outbreak with such high heterosexual transmission, it is not possible to confidently screen for syphilis risk based on assessment of high risk sexual activity.

**Test all pregnant women** for syphilis at their first prenatal visit, at the beginning of the 3rd trimester, **and** at time of delivery. Testing in both first and third trimester will improve the chances of diagnosing and treating pregnant women with syphilis, which may reduce or eliminate the infection spreading to the fetus and reduce or avoid congenital syphilis.

In addition, since most of the cases of congenital syphilis are in babies whose mothers received little or no prenatal care, inquire about prenatal care and syphilis testing whenever interacting with a pregnant woman, regardless of reason for presentation. This includes visits to the Emergency Department or primary care for any reason. At a minimum, syphilis testing should be ordered for pregnant women who have no or inconsistent prenatal care.

**Infants** should not be discharged from the hospital unless the syphilis serologic status of the mother has been confirmed at the time of delivery.

**Treat** syphilis in pregnant women as soon as infection is identified with the goal of treatment completion 30 days prior to delivery. Pregnant women should be treated with a penicillin regimen appropriate for their stage of infection. If a woman is allergic to penicillin, she must be desensitized prior to treatment with penicillin. It is imperative to also treat all partners to avoid re-infection. Contact San Joaquin Public Health Services if you have any treatment questions.

**Prevent** congenital syphilis in newborn babies by identifying and treating the infected mother early.

**Report** all syphilis cases to San Joaquin County Public Health Services (PHS) within one working

CDC Guidelines for Screening and Treatment in Pregnancy can be found at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/std/pregnancy/default.htm>

California Department of Public Health update for health care providers on syphilis in women and congenital syphilis can be found at:

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/CongenitalSyphilis.aspx>

For more information, call PHS Disease Control and Prevention at (209) 468-3845.