



**NEWS RELEASE**  
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### **Syphilis - The Great Imitator**

As of July 24, 2015, there has been a marked increase of Primary, Secondary and latent Syphilis cases in West Virginia. Thirty-nine (39) cases of syphilis have been identified throughout West Virginia, since January 2015, (6) of those which are co-infected with HIV. Syphilis cases were 24 times higher in 2014-15 than in 2011. This increase in cases has prompted West Virginia Division of Infectious Disease and Surveillance office to issue a health alert. The Health Alert System is activated anytime a disease makes a marked increase, thus putting that disease criterion in the forefront of providers' minds to consider when making a diagnosis.

Syphilis is caused by the bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*, a spirochete. It has been called "The Great Imitator" because the signs and symptoms are not unlike other diseases and conditions making it very hard to diagnose. Syphilis occurs world-wide and is usually more prevalent in urban areas. After a period of decline from the late 70s to the late 90s the incidence in developed countries has increased again in recent years, notably in Western Europe and the USA, and among men who have sex with men. Transmission occurs when a person comes into direct contact with the primary and or secondary lesions on an infected person. These lesions contain infectious spirochetes. Exposure is almost always through sexual contact. Sometimes the primary lesions might occur internally and the secondary lesions may go unnoticed and transmission might occur without either partner being aware of the disease. Transmission may occur from mother to baby, and also through blood products. Diagnosis is done by very specific blood testing and two types of tests must be done to diagnose and confirm syphilis.

According to Rochelle Sutton, Public Health Nurse at the Barbour County Health Department, "Primary Syphilis is characterized by appearance of a chancre: a firm round, and painless lesion, usually on the genitalia. The chancre can last 3-6 weeks and heals with or without treatment. Without treatment, the disease progresses to the secondary stage. This stage is characterized by skin rashes and or mucous membrane lesions. The characteristic rash of secondary Syphilis may appear as a rough, red, or reddish brown non-pruritic or itchy spots on both the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. Other symptoms can include condyloma lata, fever, swollen lymph nodes, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headache, weight loss, myalgia, and fatigue. If untreated the infection will progress to latent and then late syphilis. Syphilis is infectious and remains a reportable disease. Cases of Syphilis are so concerning that they must be reported to the State Health Department within 1 week."

Treatment for Syphilis is based on when the disease is discovered. Providers can access on-line training about Syphilis at <http://www2a.cdc.gov/stdtraining/self-study/syphilis/default.htm>. Additional information can be obtained at Barbour County Health Department by calling 304-457-1670 or by checking BCHD's Facebook page or the website: [www.barbourhealthwv.com](http://www.barbourhealthwv.com)