



## **ALERT FOR EAR NOSE AND THROAT SPECIALISTS**

### **Syphilis outbreak across Western Australia**

#### **KEY POINTS**

- **Western Australia is experiencing a syphilis outbreak. From 2014 to 2022, the annual number of infectious syphilis notifications increased nine-fold.**
- **Consider and test for syphilis in patients presenting with unexplained sensorineural hearing loss, tinnitus, vertigo, or oro-pharyngeal ulcers or lesions consistent with primary or secondary syphilis.**
- **Request syphilis serology. Testing involves syphilis serology and, where possible, syphilis PCR of an ulcer or lesion. CSF testing may be required 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 is occurring across all populations in WA. Those disproportionately represented in the 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
- From 2014 to date, 14 congenital syphilis cases have been reported in WA, with four new cases of congenital syphilis reported since 1 January 2022.

#### **Test**

- Consider syphilis in patients presenting with unexplained sensorineural hearing loss, tinnitus, vertigo, or oro-pharyngeal ulcers or lesions consistent with primary or secondary syphilis. Testing is done by syphilis serology.
- If a person has an ulcer(s) or skin/mucosal lesion, swab the lesion (dry swab) and order a syphilis PCR test, in addition to taking blood for syphilis serology.
- CSF testing may be required for neurological presentations.

#### **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 Silver Book  
<https://www.health.wa.gov.au/Silver-book/Notifiable-infections/Syphilis>

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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)