

Health Advisory: HIV Outbreak and Syphilis Concern in Duluth Area

Minnesota Department of Health, Tue, March 4 12:00 CST 2021

Action Steps

Local and tribal health department: Please forward to hospitals, clinics, urgent care centers, emergency departments, convenience clinics, **jails, correctional facilities, chemical dependency and treatment centers** in your jurisdiction.

Hospitals, clinics and other facilities: Please forward to health care providers.

Health care providers:

- Test people for HIV and syphilis who were in the Duluth area since September 2019 AND are at high risk for either disease, including sexual partners or equipment sharing partner of known cases.
- Link people with positive HIV tests to medical care, including antiretroviral therapy.
- Provide or refer for prevention and harm reduction services, including:
 - [CDC Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis \(PrEP\)](https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html) [<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html>]
 - [CDC PEP Post-Exposure Prophylaxis \(PEP\)](https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html) [<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html>]
 - [MDH Syringe Services Program \(SSP\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/syringe/ssp.html) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/syringe/ssp.html>]
- Report cases of HIV, syphilis, chlamydia and gonorrhea to MDH
 - [MDH HIV/AIDS Confidential Case Report Forms](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/hcp/hivform.html) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/hcp/hivform.html>]
 - [MDH Confidential Syphilis Report Form](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/syphilis/hcp/syphform.pdf) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/syphilis/hcp/syphform.pdf>]
 - [MDH Confidential Chlamydia and Gonorrhea Report Form](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/stds/hcp/gcform.pdf) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/stds/hcp/gcform.pdf>]
- Subscribe to the [HIV/STD Prevention & Data Updates](https://service.govdelivery.com/accounts/MNMDH/subscriber/new?topic_id=MNMDH_429) [https://service.govdelivery.com/accounts/MNMDH/subscriber/new?topic_id=MNMDH_429]

Background

The Minnesota Department of Health and St. Louis County Public Health are collaboratively investigating an outbreak of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections. The outbreak has been declared among newly diagnosed cases of HIV in people after September 1, 2019 residing in the Duluth area* at the time of diagnosis or reported cases of HIV that are linked to cases that are part of the outbreak as a sex partner, drug user sharing partner, or person in their social network. This includes people experiencing homelessness known to be in the area, people who are incarcerated, or people in chemical dependency treatment centers where their regular address is in the outbreak area. There have been 13 cases associated with the outbreak

between September 2019 and February 2021. This is a significant increase and has potential to spread very quickly. Typically, we see 1-5 cases of HIV per year in St. Louis County.

There is also a rise in the number of syphilis cases being reported in the Duluth Area. Statewide rates of syphilis have been of concern for many years, though preliminary data as of March 2021 indicates a significant rise in the number of early syphilis cases in the area over the past year. Most cases are occurring in the male population. However, there is also an increase in the number of cases among females of reproductive age, which raises concerns regarding the possibility of congenital syphilis cases.

Increasing rates of HIV and syphilis are concerning and require deliberate action.

* “Duluth area” includes the 30-mile radius around the City of Duluth.

Recommendations for Health Care Providers

Test

- People who are at high risk of HIV infection should be tested when requested, or at least annually. People in the outbreak area should be tested more frequently.
- People likely to be at high risk include:
 - Men who have sex with men (MSM).
 - Sex partners or syringe-sharing partners of people known to be living with HIV.
 - People who inject drugs (PWID) and their sex partners and needle/equipment sharing partners.
 - People who are experiencing homelessness.
 - People who exchange sex for income or other items they need.
- All other people should be tested annually as indicated in CDC’s [Revised Recommendations for HIV Testing of Adults, Adolescents, and Pregnant Women in HealthCare Settings](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5514a1.htm) [<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5514a1.htm>].
- Screen pregnant people for HIV and syphilis according to the [Clinician’s Guide to Routine HIV Testing During Pregnancy 2019](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/hcp/perinatal/hivtestpreg.pdf) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/hcp/perinatal/hivtestpreg.pdf>] and [Syphilis in Pregnancy and Congenital Syphilis](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/syphilis/hcp/healthcarewomen.html) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/syphilis/hcp/healthcarewomen.html>]

Treat

- Treat all cases of STDs right away according to the CDC’s [2015 Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/default.htm) [<https://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/default.htm>].
- Link newly diagnosed people to HIV medical care.
- Ensure that people living with HIV are engaged in care and receiving antiretroviral therapy.
- Ensure people receiving treatment for HIV adhere to prescribed therapy and are engaged in ongoing care.

Prevent

- Screen patients for factors that increase the risk of getting HIV, including people diagnosed with Hepatitis C (HCV) infection.
- Complete a sexual and behavioral risk assessment for all patients. This should include an assessment of sexual and substance use practices for both the individual and their sexual partners.
- Provide or refer PWID to [MDH's Syringe Service Programs](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/syringe/ssp.html) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/syringe/ssp.html>].
- Refer for medication-assisted treatment (e.g., opioid substitutions therapy) and counseling services, when appropriate.
- Spread information about [Undetectable = Untransmittable \(U=U\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/prevention/uu/index.html) [<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/hiv/prevention/uu/index.html>] to patients and providers.

A copy of this HAN is available at: [MDH Health Alert Network](#)

The content of this message is intended for public health and health care personnel and response partners who have a need to know the information to perform their duties.