



Contact: **MaryWade Triplett**

Public Information Officer

Monongalia County Health Department

Morgantown, WV 26505

(304) 598-5152 | www.monchd.org

MaryWade.Triplett@wv.gov

For Immediate Release

Syphilis outbreak occurring in Morgantown; testing and precautions offered

MORGANTOWN, WV (April 12, 2019) — The number of syphilis cases are on the rise in Morgantown, mostly among men who have sex with other men.

Monongalia County Health Department officials want to alert the public to the outbreak, offer suggestions on how to avoid and detect syphilis and provide information on other efforts being made to curtail the number of cases of this sexually transmitted disease (STD) as well as others that are on the rise.

“One of the common public health diseases that previously had died down significantly is STDs,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer.

“However, with high-risk behaviors and unprotected and anonymous sexual intercourse, syphilis, as well as gonorrhea and chlamydia, are increasing tremendously.”

Nationally, syphilis rates have risen 75 percent in four years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov), Smith noted.

“I think that if we look specifically at Mon County, what we see is the incidence of syphilis is not related to intravenous (IV) drug use as it is in other areas of the state, but is related to men having sex with men who participate in high-risk behavior such as having frequent, anonymous sex,” Smith said.

If left untreated, syphilis has three stages, with different signs and symptoms in each stage. It typically begins with a painless, open sore at the original site of infection, which may or may not be noticed by the infected person.

If treated quickly, syphilis is curable with antibiotics. If not, secondary syphilis can include skin rash, swollen lymph nodes and fever. During the latent, or tertiary stage,

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453 Van Voorhis Road

Morgantown, WV 26505

there are no signs and symptoms, but the disease can damage internal organs and eventually lead to death.

In addition to syphilis, gonorrhea has also increased nationally, by 67 percent overall and nearly doubling among men, according to the CDC. The speed with which gonorrhea is increasing in women is also concerning. And chlamydia remains the most common condition reported to the CDC. More than 1.7 million cases were diagnosed in 2017, with 45 percent of them among 15- to 24-year-old females.

Also, Smith noted, Cabell-Huntington Health Department in Huntington has reported a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) cluster, mostly among those who use IV drugs. Cabell County typically has a baseline of five new HIV cases a year. The current HIV cluster includes 35 known cases. Staff from health departments around the state are bolstering Cabell-Huntington's efforts to identify and treat people with HIV to avoid or curtail its spread beyond Cabell County. If left untreated, HIV can lead to AIDS.

Precautions should be taken to avoid getting syphilis and other STDs. These include limiting and preferably knowing your sexual partners, using condoms correctly for every sexual encounter and getting tested for STDs. All sexually active people should be tested at least once; people who engage in high-risk behaviors should be tested at least every six months.

In the effort to educate the community about syphilis, Monongalia County Health Department is working with area clubs to put up flyers alerting them to the outbreak, what to look for and how to avoid getting it. Also, a dating app has agreed to post a message with a link that leads to more information on syphilis on MCHD's website.

"We are trying a novel approach by working with one of the apps that feels responsible and wants to make it safe for their users," Smith said. "They want to make it as safe as it can be so that people who participate with that dating app will not get a communicable disease.

"This has not been tried by the state. We're in uncharted waters. We're working with them and we're pleased they are putting the word out for us."

MCHD Clinical Services offers free, confidential and non-judgmental testing and treatment for STDs. Call 304-598-5119 to make an appointment.

Check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at WVMCHD for up-to-date information on health and wellness in the community.