

LB41 | Increasing Access to Prenatal Screenings for Nebraska Mothers

Policy Brief | 2025

Nebraska has seen an alarming 1,100% increase in congenital syphilis since 2017. This preventable disease can have devastating consequences for infants, including stillbirth and death.

LB41 increases prenatal syphilis screenings to protect the health of mothers and babies.

■ Background

Like many states, Nebraska is seeing a rise in the rates of babies born infected with syphilis, called congenital syphilis. In 2023, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services issued an advisory regarding the increase in syphilis cases within the state.¹ Since 2017, Nebraska has seen the following changes:

- ▶ 373% overall increase in syphilis infections.
- ▶ 1,100% increase in congenital syphilis.



Congenital syphilis has detrimental impacts on moms and babies. It may cause stillbirth, miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight or death shortly after birth.

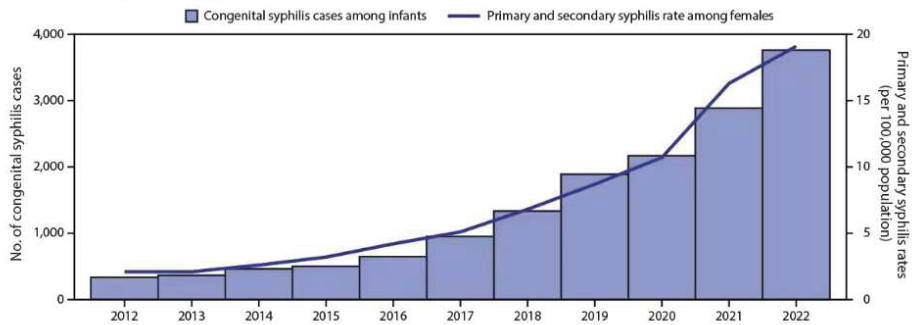
Nationwide, there were 10 times as many congenital syphilis cases reported in 2022 than in 2012. Among all congenital syphilis cases nationwide, 6% were stillbirths and 1% resulted in infant death.² Nebraska's rural counties of Thurston, Boone and Cherry had the highest rate of syphilis infections among women ages 15 to 44 in 2022.³

Congenital syphilis is preventable and occurs when syphilis is transmitted from a pregnant woman to her fetus. Early detection and treatment of maternal syphilis are crucial in minimizing the risk of transmission and adverse outcomes for the infant. Treatment includes penicillin and other antibiotics, administered as a shot or through an intravenous (IV) line. Treating maternal syphilis quickly is crucial to preventing harmful impacts of the disease on baby.

Babies who survive may face developmental delays, brain and nerve problems, deformed bones and other challenges.

Current Nebraska statute (Neb. Rev. St. 71-502-.03)⁴ calls for a syphilis screening at the mother's first prenatal visit. In 2024, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists updated its recommendation to include two additional screens, one in the third trimester and one at delivery.⁵

Reported number of cases of congenital syphilis among infants, by year of birth and rates* of reported cases of primary and secondary syphilis† among females aged 15-44 years, by year — United States, 2012-2022



* Cases per 100,000 population.

† Primary and secondary syphilis case data for all U.S. territories and freely associated states and outlying areas were not available for all years; therefore, rates presented include only the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

LB41: Increasing Access to Prenatal Screenings (State Senator Merv Riepe, District 12)

Neb. Rev. St. 71-502.03 calls for a screening for syphilis for pregnant women at the first prenatal visit. LB41 updates the statute to include two additional screenings, during the third trimester and at birth.

Conclusion

Nebraska is experiencing an alarming increase in congenital syphilis cases, where babies are born infected with the disease. This can have devastating consequences for infants, including stillbirth, developmental delays and death. LB41 (State Senator Riepe) proposes increasing syphilis screenings for pregnant women to align with current recommendations and aiming to prevent transmission and protect the health of newborns.

References

- 1 Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. (July 2023). Syphilis incidence continues increasing in Nebraska [Memo]. Health Alert Network. <https://dhhs.ne.gov/han%20Documents/ALERT07182023.pdf>.
- 2 McDonald R, O’Callaghan K, Torrone E, et al. (2023). Vital signs: Missed opportunities for preventing congenital syphilis — United States, 2022. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 72, 1269–1274.
- 3 Centers for Disease Prevention and Control. (2024). County-level syphilis rates to direct screening efforts. <https://www.cdc.gov/sti-statistics/county-level-syphilis-data>.
- 4 Neb. Rev. Stat. 71-502-.03.
- 5 American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (April 2024). Screening for syphilis in pregnancy. <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/practice-advisory/articles/2024/04/screening-for-syphilis-in-pregnancy>.

