

Definition/Description:

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. The clinical manifestations of infection are characterized according to various stages, including primary (infectious), secondary (infectious), early latent (infectious), late latent, tertiary and congenital syphilis. If left untreated, syphilis can result in permanent brain and heart damage that may lead to death. In Manitoba, all cases of syphilis are reportable by laboratories and attending health care professionals to the Director of Communicable Disease Control at Manitoba Health.

Source:

- *Case Event (Numerator) Data*: Communicable Disease Control Unit, Public Health Branch, Manitoba Health
- *Population (Denominator) Data*: Decision Support Services, Health Information Management Branch, Manitoba Health
- *Tabulations*: Population Health and Health Systems Analysis Unit, Quality and Decision Support, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority

Findings:

In the Winnipeg Health Region (WHR), less than five cases of infectious syphilis have been reported annually since 1996 and all have been imported cases (Table SYPH1). Similarly, the incidence of non-infectious syphilis has remained low, ranging from 5 to 18 cases per year.

Table SYPH1

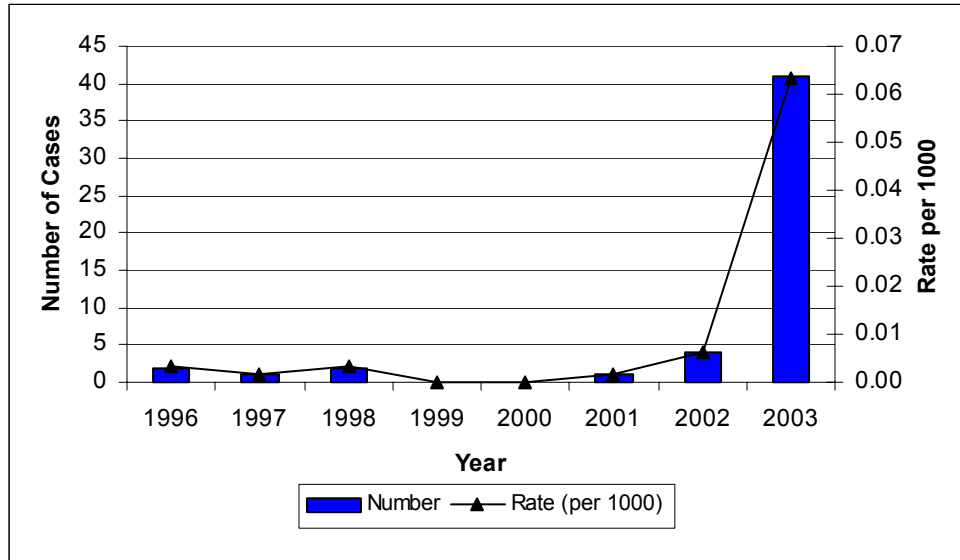
Syphilis: Number of Cases and Crude Rate of Infection, Winnipeg Health Region, 1996-2002 (Both Genders, All Ages Combined)

Year	Infectious Syphilis		Non-Infectious Syphilis	
	Frequency	Crude Rate (per 1000)	Frequency	Crude Rate (per 1000)
1996	2	0.00	11	0.02
1997	1	0.00	15	0.02
1998	2	0.00	18	0.03
1999	0	0.00	6	0.01
2000	0	0.00	11	0.02
2001	1	0.00	5	0.01
2002	4	0.01	16	0.02

Outbreak of Infectious Syphilis, 2003

In February 2003, an outbreak of *locally acquired* infectious syphilis was declared in Winnipeg. By the end of December, 41 cases were reported to the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority - a rate of 0.06 per 1000 population (Figure SYPH1).

Figure SYPH1
Infectious Syphilis: Number of Reported Cases and Crude Rate of Infection, Winnipeg Health Region, 1996-2003



Sixty percent of cases were reported among males and more than half of all cases were between the ages of 30 and 49 years. The majority of cases resided within the Downtown and Point Douglas Community Areas (78%). Sixty-two percent of cases were among Aboriginal clients. Predominant risk markers among cases included patronage at inner-city bars, significant alcohol consumption, mental health issues, and anonymous and unprotected sex, including participation in sex trade. Heterosexual transmission was predominant (91%), although transmission among men having sex with men (MSM) was reported late in December, and a link to an MSM outbreak in Vancouver (British Columbia) was established.

Further information describing this outbreak, including a summary of the key components of the outbreak response and management plan, successes, challenges and next steps is included in the final summary report: *Outbreak of Infectious Syphilis in the Winnipeg Health Region, Final Summary Report, March 2004*.¹

Of note, this outbreak follows the re-emergence of infectious syphilis elsewhere in Canada. Beginning in 1997, outbreaks have been reported in Vancouver, Yukon Territory, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal; occurring primarily among sex trade workers and men having sex with men. In 2003, the national rate of infection was 2.7 per 100,000 population.²

¹<http://www.wrha.mb.ca/caring/preventill/syphilis.php> . Of the 41 cases reported during 2003, one case was later reclassified as late latent (non-infectious).

²Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections Section, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Health Canada: Reported cases and rates of notifiable STI from January 1 to December 31, 2003 and January 1 to December 31, 2002 (preliminary data), June 10, 2004.

Highlights:

- In the WHR, the incidence of infectious and non-infectious syphilis has remained fairly stable from 1996 through 2002.
- In 2003, an outbreak of *locally acquired* infectious syphilis was declared; 41 cases were reported, a rate of infection of 0.06 per 1000 population.

ⁱ Additional information describing communicable diseases (including sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections) and immunization in the Winnipeg Health Region is available in **Report on Communicable Diseases and Immunization in the Winnipeg Health Region, 2004** [available fall 2004].