



# Western Australian Syphilis Outbreak Response Group Communique Report – Quarter 4 2023

<b>Distribution</b>	Internal WA Department of Health and stakeholders
<b>Target audience</b>	Health workers in WA
<b>Communique no.</b>	20
<b>Reporting Data</b>	As of 31 December 2023 (current status)

## Background

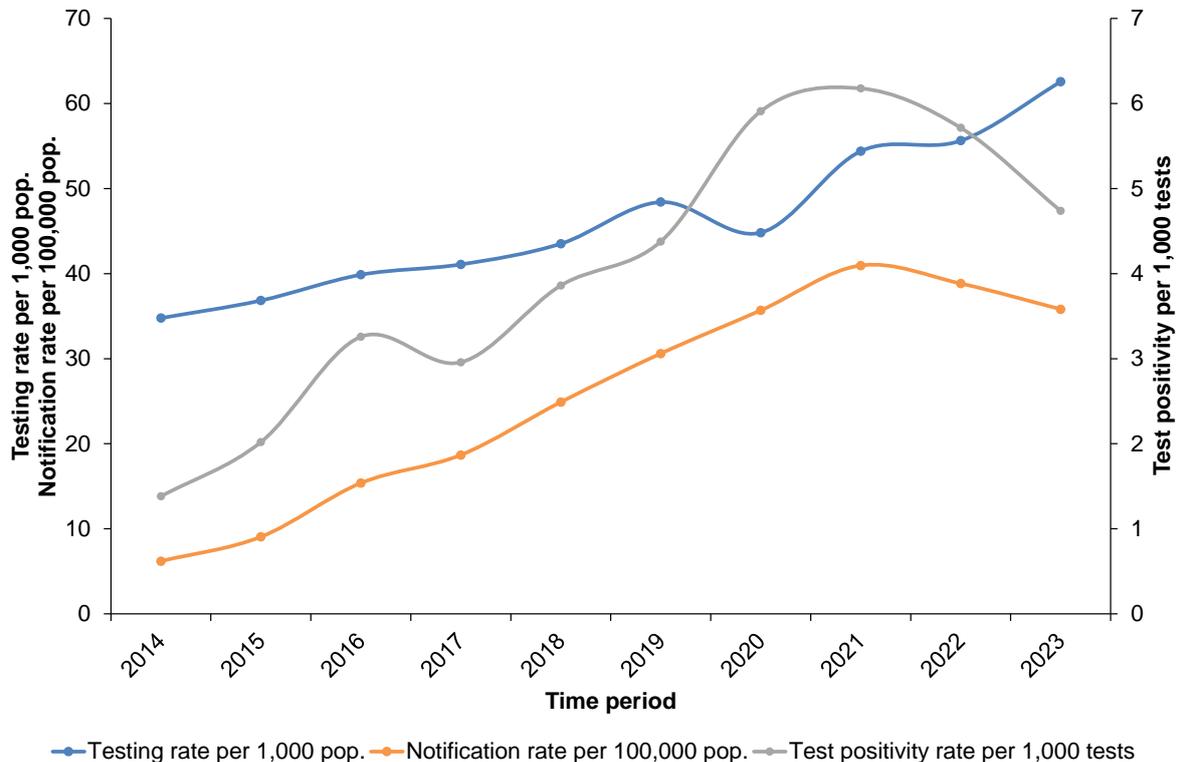
- The syphilis outbreak was identified in the Kimberley region in mid-2014 and a related cluster was identified in mid-2018 in the Pilbara region. Cross-border and cross-region population movement increased the spread to the adjacent Midwest and Goldfields regions. Syphilis outbreaks were identified in metropolitan Perth and South West regions in 2020.
- Following the declaration of syphilis outbreaks in the metropolitan Perth and South West region, the Chief Health Officer authorised a statewide public health response to infectious syphilis in 2020.
- The Western Australian Syphilis Outbreak Response Group (WA SORG) was first formed in August 2018 to coordinate response to the syphilis outbreak among Aboriginal people in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions. As syphilis is now a statewide public health concern, WA SORG coordinates the statewide response to infectious and congenital syphilis.
- Communiqués will be prepared and distributed following each quarterly meeting of the WA SORG and aim to increase clinician awareness of the evolving syphilis outbreak in WA.



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## Current status

**Figure 1: Syphilis notification rate, testing rate, and test positivity rate in WA by reporting period (12-month reporting period: 01 January to 31 December)**



- Syphilis notifications peaked at 41.0 per 100,000 population in 2021, following consecutive annual increases over the seven-year period from 2014. From 2021 to 2023, the syphilis notification rate decreased by a total of 12% to 35.9 per 100,000 population.
- The syphilis testing rate has increased consistently from 2014 onwards. From 2021 to 2023, the testing rate increased by 15% from 54.4 to 62.6 per 1,000 population.
- The syphilis test positivity rate also increased significantly from 2014 onwards. However, from 2021 to 2023, the test positivity rate decreased by 23% from 6.2 to 4.7 per 1,000 tests. This suggests that the decrease in notifications over this period was the result of decreased disease transmission.
- Testing rates increased in all regions in 2023 compared to 2022.
- Trends in syphilis notification rates varied between regions. In 2023, notification rates decreased in the Kimberley and Metropolitan regions; increased in the Goldfields, Pilbara, South West and Wheatbelt regions; and remained stable in the Great Southern and Midwest regions.
- Trends in the syphilis test positivity rate also varied between regions. In 2023, test positivity rates decreased in the Kimberley, Metropolitan, Midwest and South West regions; increased in the Goldfields and Wheatbelt regions; and remained stable in the Great Southern and Pilbara regions.



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**Table 1. Characteristics of infectious syphilis cases notified in Western Australia, from 1 June 2014 to 31 December 2023.**

Characteristic	n(%)
Number of infectious syphilis cases	4,946
% Male / % Female	69% / 31%
Congenital syphilis cases, confirmed (probable)	14 (4)
Congenital syphilis-related deaths	6

**Table 2. Characteristics of infectious syphilis and congenital syphilis cases in the current reporting quarter**

Characteristics	Year to date n (%)	Q4 2023 n (%)	Q4 2022 n (%)	Q4 2022 to Q4 2023 % change
<b>Infectious syphilis</b>				
Number of infectious syphilis cases	705	154	180	-14% ↓
Aboriginal	320 (45%)	64 (42%)	79 (44%)	-19% ↓
Non-Aboriginal	377 (53%)	89 (58%)	101 (56%)	-12% ↓
Male	419 (59%)	96 (62%)	113 (63%)	-15% ↓
Female	286 (41%)	58 (38%)	67 (37%)	-13% ↓
Females of childbearing age	265 (38%)	49 (32%)	63 (35%)	-22% ↓
Pregnancy status at time of diagnosis (% females of childbearing age)	34 (13%)	14 (22%)	6 (12%)	-57% ↓
15-19 yrs	53 (8%)	10 (6%)	14 (8%)	-20% ↓
20-24 yrs	113 (16%)	20 (13%)	20 (11%)	↔
25-29 yrs	131 (19%)	24 (16%)	40 (22%)	-40% ↓
30-34 yrs	126 (18%)	26 (17%)	33 (18%)	-21% ↓
35-39 yrs	105 (15%)	18 (12%)	28 (16%)	-36% ↓
40-44 yrs	68 (10%)	19 (12%)	15 (8%)	27% ↑
45+ yrs	107 (15%)	35 (23%)	29 (16%)	21% ↑
<b>Congenital syphilis</b>				
Congenital syphilis cases, confirmed (probable)	3 (1)	1 (0)	2 (0)	-50% ↓
Congenital syphilis-related deaths	1	0	0	↔

Note: Not all age groups included  
Childbearing age: 15 to 44 years



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## WA SORG Governance Update

- The WA SORG continue to meet on a quarterly basis, last meeting held on 5 March 2024.
- WA SORG is activating a Pathology Working Group. This group was activated to address several recommendations from the recent congenital syphilis reviews related to pathology and will include representation from WA pathology providers and public health.

## Priority Areas Update

<b>Priority Area 1: Community engagement, education, and prevention</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New HealthySexual campaign with a focus on syphilis in market from November 2023 until June 2024. Campaign materials include social media, radio, buses, phone booth and venue ads. Radio advert on syphilis and HIV now playing in Kimberley, Pilbara, and Goldfields regions.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 2: Workforce development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ASHM Sexual Health Update regarding use of social media and contact tracing hosted 21 February 2024.</li><li>• WA SORG to explore and implement syphilis training as 'role essential' for key roles in health services across WA.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 3: Testing, treatment and contact tracing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In Quarter 4 2023, 457 point-of-care tests (PoCTs) were used for client testing and, of those, 14 were reactive. Since the beginning of the WA Syphilis PoCT program to 31 December 2023, there have been 5223 tests used for client testing and, of those, 233 were reactive.</li><li>• Work continues to activate WEBpas alerts for untreated and high-risk syphilis cases.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 4: Surveillance and reporting</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• REDCap syphilis management and contact tracing system (SMACTS) rolled out in all WACHS regions. Improvements occurring on the functionality of the system.</li><li>• Antenatal syphilis testing data collected through the Midwives Notification System is now live on the Maternity Dashboard for monitoring and continuous quality improvement initiatives.</li><li>• CDCD is preparing an updated report on the findings of the congenital syphilis public health reviews.</li></ul>
<b>Priority Area 5: Antenatal and postnatal care</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two congenital syphilis public health reviews occurred since the last Communique Report (Q3 2023).</li><li>• Congenital syphilis public health review guidelines have been updated based on feedback learnings of reviews held so far.</li></ul>

### Prepared by:

WA Syphilis Outbreak Response Group (WA SORG)  
March 2024

Further information relating to the WA SORG and access to additional resources and trainings are available on the WA SORG webpage:

[https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/U\\_Z/WA-Syphilis-outbreak-response](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/U_Z/WA-Syphilis-outbreak-response)