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MECKLENBURG COUNTY

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FROM PAGE ONE/SCIENCE

More cases of syphilis reported

In 3 years, numbers have nearly quadrupled

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Five years ago, public health officials believed they were on the brink of wiping out syphilis in Mecklenburg County.

From 1994 to 2003, reported cases had dropped from 461 to 49, in part due to extra money the federal government had given the county to fight the disease.

But syphilis is now rising again, with most new infections occurring among homosexual and bisexual men, said John Glorioso, director of the Mecklenburg County Health Department's syphilis outreach program. It's a new population for the disease, he said, adding that encounters arranged through Internet chat rooms are helping it spread.

Syphilis cases in Mecklenburg have nearly quadrupled in the past three years, from 5.6 per 100,000 people in 2003 to 23.5 per 100,000 in 2006, said county epidemiologist Donna Smith. This year, there have been 69 confirmed cases so far.

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Syphilis Outbreaks in North Carolina

Five of the 28 counties nationwide that the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said have syphilis problems are in North Carolina. They are Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth, Wake and Robeson counties. Other states have only one or two on the list, he said.

More cases of syphilis reported

Mecklenburg from 1A

With the increase, Charlotte has joined cities such as San Francisco, Atlanta and New York in reporting sharp syphilis increases.

Syphilis is a bacterial infection spread through person-to-person contact, often through sex. Some people may not realize they're infected because it mimics other diseases. The earliest stages are easiest to treat. If not treated, syphilis can lead to organ and nerve failure.

Almost a third of N.C.'s cases

The number of women getting infected is also growing, and this may be partially linked to men leading bisexual lifestyles, said Glorioso.

Glorioso said he monitors Internet chat rooms for men seeking men on his home computer to keep abreast of behavior that may be tied to unsafe sex. He said he is sometimes approached by men who say they're married. The Internet is discreet and, for many, a lifetime of constant safe-sex vigilance has gotten old, he said. Many sexually transmitted diseases are now less frightening, Glorioso said, because of improved medicines and medical care.

Charlotte and Mecklenburg County account for nearly one-third the reported early-stage syphilis cases in North Carolina last year. Eight years before, it was closer to one-tenth, said state epidemiologist Bill Jones.

Using Internet to educate

Controlling syphilis now may involve a different education strategy, Glorioso said. Internet outreach is a new frontier, he said.

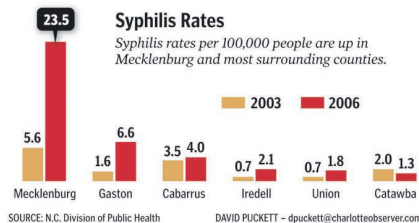
Metrolina AIDS Project staffers visit chat rooms frequented by men seeking men and answer questions about sexually transmitted diseases, said education director Omar Whiteside. People don't know enough about syphilis, he said.

The number of people who get tested is slowly increasing, said Lorraine Houser, a sexually transmitted disease specialist for the county. This is partly due to word of mouth and a blitz of advertisements, from "in-your-face" ads in bathroom stalls, to newspaper announcements.

Syphilis is cured with antibiotics, but it gets harder to treat the longer the infection continues, Glorioso said.

The goal is to get back to the days of just a few infections a year and, hopefully, to get rid of syphilis altogether.

"We have a long way to go before we're there in Mecklenburg County," he said.



Syphilis Explained

- **Symptoms:** In the first stage, a painless blister forms in the genital area or mouth, and then disappears. But bacteria remain. Many weeks later, in stage two, symptoms including fever, muscle aches and rashes appear. They, too, go away. A long latent stage with no symptoms begins, but the bacteria remain.
- **Complications:** If left untreated, patients can develop organ problems many years later. Some progress to nervous system infections, which are difficult to treat. Women with syphilis infections can pass them on to newborns.
- **Treatment:** All stages of syphilis are treated by injection with penicillin, but resistant strains of the bacteria are emerging.
- **Prevention and risk reduction:** Abstinence; monogamy with an uninfected partner; consistent use of latex condoms.

Where to Get Tested

Call your health care provider or visit one of the following:

- **The Lesbian & Gay Community Center.**
Walk-in.
Every Wednesday, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
1401 Central Ave., Charlotte.
704-333-0144.
- **Quality Home Care Services.**
Walk-in.
Every Monday, 5 to 7 p.m., Charlotte.
4510 Sunset Road, Suite D.
704-394-8968
- **Metrolina AIDS Project.**
Walk-in.
Every Friday, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
127 Scaleybark Road.
704-333-1435.
- **Mecklenburg County Health Department.**
Appointments.
249 Billingsley Road.
2845 Beatties Ford Road.
704-336-6500.

The making of “More cases of syphilis” by Megha Satyanarayana

The county public health department puts much of its disease data online, and it's pretty up to date. So, I was curious, and started leafing through it. I actually noticed an HIV statistic first, and when I called the health department, they started telling me about syphilis and how HIV infection makes syphilis easier to contract and vice-versa. Sure enough, when I saw the records, it looked like the trend in syphilis was going up. Then, when we started talking about who was getting sick, a really interesting factoid came up. Charlotte is a big city, but still a bit behind other big cities when it comes to public health concerns. Something happens in San Francisco, New York, or Atlanta, and it's about 3 years before Charlotte gets it. So, based on public health practices, where a person with any infectious disease is asked to disclose people they've come in contact with, the department realized that this particular upswing was in men who sleep with men, a known problem in the previously mentioned big cities. In essence, Charlotte had arrived into big city-dom with this crisis.

As infected men listed their partners, there was a ton of overlap. The internet, they would say, is where they met their partners, and folks were going to the same sites - hence the overlap in names - a social network much like Facebook, but for sex. After that, it was just a question of getting the numbers right and suddenly you have an interesting story, because a) men were willing to disclose all partners, male and female, which doesn't always happen with stigmatized diseases and b) the disease has shifted, from predominantly black, poor and gender-nonspecific to men of all income levels and ethnicities who sleep with men, and just a few women. Because it's sexually transmitted, the new upswing in syphilis has forced the county to reexamine how they talk about protected sex in a population that for the last 25 years has been practically forced to practice safe sex, and the message is no longer working.

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