



Public Health Advisory

May 18, 2023

Drug Shortage of Bicillin L-A® for the Treatment of Syphilis

Situation

The CDC and FDA have issued reports regarding national shortages of Benzathine penicillin G (Bicillin L-A®) due to a surge in demand. The FDA estimates that the issue will be resolved by the fourth quarter of this year, but emergency stockpiles of the medication are not available, and existing supplies are extremely limited.

This shortage is a matter of significant public health concern because Bicillin L-A® is the only recommended treatment for pregnant individuals who are infected with or exposed to syphilis. The rates of congenital syphilis have increased 203% nationwide in the past five years, according to CDC disease surveillance data from 2021, Nevada currently ranks ninth in the country for rates of congenital syphilis.

While Bicillin L-A® remains the treatment of choice for all patients with syphilis, the CDC advises healthcare providers to prioritize its use for pregnant individuals and infants with congenital syphilis. In cases where the drug is unavailable, healthcare providers may consider alternative treatment with doxycycline for non-pregnant individuals.

For other conditions unrelated to syphilis, healthcare providers should explore alternative treatments options. For instance, strep throat should be treated using alternative therapies.

Recommendations

Healthcare providers should closely monitor their Bicillin L-A® inventory and exercise clinical judgement to prioritize its use. If necessary due to the drug shortage, healthcare providers may consider using doxycycline as an alternative treatment. Bicillin L-A® should be used as the preferred treatment for all syphilis patients whenever supply permits.

The Southern Nevada Health District has provided an example prioritization strategy that healthcare providers may consider adopting to ensure that CDC priority populations have access to treatment throughout the drug shortage.

Bicillin L-A® Prioritization

Healthcare providers may prioritize the following individuals diagnosed with syphilis for treatment with Bicillin L-A®:

- Pregnant individuals: Bicillin L-A® is the only acceptable treatment for this group.
- Infants with congenital syphilis.
- Sexual partners of pregnant individuals
- Women of childbearing age without consistent birth control.
- Individuals with an allergy to doxycycline.

- Individuals infected with HIV.
- Individuals with early syphilis (primary, secondary, early latent).
- Individuals who have already initiated treatment with a 3-week course of Bicillin L-A®.

Syphilis Alternate Treatment

If necessary due to the drug shortage, healthcare providers may consider treating non-pregnant individuals with doxycycline as follows:

- Early syphilis (primary, secondary, or early latent): Doxycycline 100mg by mouth twice daily for 14 days.
- Late syphilis (late latent or unknown duration): Doxycycline 100mg by mouth twice daily for 28 days.

Doxycycline is an FDA Pregnancy Category D medication. It is not an alternative treatment for pregnant individuals. Bicillin L-A® is the only recommended treatment for pregnant people infected with or exposed to syphilis.

Further Considerations

- Regularly monitor RPR titers to ensure a 4-fold decrease is achieved in 6 to 12 months.
- Educate patients receiving alternative treatment with doxycycline on the importance of adherence.
- Reassess the prioritization strategy periodically to align with the available supply.

Resources

The Southern Nevada Health District Division of Disease Surveillance and Control provides afterhours support at 702-759-1300, option 6. Healthcare providers are encouraged to contact them with any questions regarding syphilis staging, treatment and prioritization efforts. Syphilis is a reportable condition in Clark County, NV.

[FDA Drug Shortages](https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/drugshortages/default.cfm) - <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/drugshortages/default.cfm>

[CDC - STD Treatment - Drug notices](https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/drug-notice.htm) - <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/drug-notice.htm>

[Syphilis - STI Treatment Guidelines \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis.htm) - <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis.htm>

[Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2021 \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2021/default.htm#:~:text=More%20than%20700%2C000%20gonorrhea%20cases,in%20the%20past%20five%20years) - <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2021/default.htm#:~:text=More%20than%20700%2C000%20gonorrhea%20cases,in%20the%20past%20five%20years>



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Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action

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