



Hamilton

Public Health Services
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MEDICAL ADVISORY

Benzathine Penicillin G L-A (Bicillin® L-A) shortage – November 2020

TO:

Family Physicians
Infectious Disease Physicians
St. Joseph's Centre for Ambulatory Health Services, Urgent Care
Emergency Departments

FOR YOUR INFORMATION:

Academy of Medicine
Central West Medical Officers of Health
Dr. Richard McLean, VP Medical, Hamilton Health Sciences
Dr. Peter Fitzgerald, President McMaster Children's Hospital
Dr. Thomas Stewart, Chief of Staff, St. Joseph's Healthcare

FROM: Dr. Ninh Tran, Associate Medical Officer of Health, Hamilton Public Health Services

DATE: November 20, 2020

Hamilton Public Health Services (PHS) is notifying health care providers of a Benzathine Penicillin G L-A (Bicillin® L-A) shortage; the first-line treatment for both infectious and non-infectious syphilis. The Ministry of Health has requested that all Public Health Units order Bicillin® L-A on an as-needed-basis and to avoid stockpiling medication. Locally, Hamilton PHS has observed a recent increase in cases of infectious syphilis between October 1- November 7, 2020.

LOCAL CONTEXT:

Between October 1 and November 7, 2020 there have been a total of 38 syphilis cases reported. Of these, 22 were diagnosed as infectious, 1 as non-infectious and 15 cases are currently under investigation. The majority of cases (80%) were male, and the average age of cases was 40 years old.

BACKGROUND:

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by *Treponema pallidum*, and can be transmitted through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Transmission can also occur from infected mother to infant during pregnancy or birth. Early symptoms can include genital sores, rash and headache. Untreated, syphilis can eventually affect the brain and nervous system¹.

¹ Public Health Ontario. 'Syphilis', *Public Health Ontario*, Toronto, 2020, <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/sexually-transmitted-infections/syphilis>

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Syphilis screening is recommended for anyone presenting with risk factors, as well as during pregnancy.
2. Until supply levels return to normal, PHS recommends that health care providers prioritize the use of Bicillin® L-A for the treatment of syphilis in pregnant adults infected with or exposed to syphilis as there is no satisfactory alternative to penicillin for treatment of syphilis in pregnancy.
3. Distribution of Bicillin® L-A treatment by Hamilton PHS to community health providers will be prioritized for pregnant cases infected with or exposed to syphilis.
4. Doxycycline and Ceftriaxone are considered alternatives to penicillin for treatment of primary, secondary, latent and tertiary syphilis in non-pregnant adults. The treatment guidelines for doxycycline and ceftriaxone are listed below.
5. Individuals treated with alternatives may take longer to become non-infectious and should be advised to abstain from condomless sexual contact until treatment has been completed and ideally for seven days after completion of treatment. Close client follow-up is recommended.
6. Complete STI screening, including chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV, should be considered for individuals at risk or being treated for syphilis.

As per the current Canadian STI guidelines, the alternative treatment for syphilis in non-pregnant adults is:

Primary, secondary and early latent syphilis

- Doxycycline 100mg PO BID X 14 days **OR**
- In exceptional circumstances and when close follow-up is assured:
 - Ceftriaxone 1g intravenously or intramuscularly daily for 10 days

Latent late latent, cardiovascular syphilis and gumma

- Doxycycline 100mg PO BID X 28 days **OR**
- In exceptional circumstances and when close follow-up is assured:
 - Ceftriaxone 1g intravenously or intramuscularly daily for 10 days.

Free STI medication, including Doxycycline, is available to clinicians to order. Bicillin® L-A will be provided on an as-needed basis until the shortage subsides.

<https://www.hamilton.ca/public-health/health-professionals/sti-guidelines-medication-ordering-blood-exposure-reporting>

Condoms and sexual health supplies are available to City of Hamilton agencies who serve persons at risk of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. <https://www.hamilton.ca/public-health/clinics-services/condom-and-sexual-health-supply-ordering>

For questions, please contact the Sexual Health program via, the Sexual Health information line at 905- 528-5894, Monday-Friday, 0830-1630.

