

# The Texas Birth Defects MONITOR

## Summary: December 2023, Volume 29

The Monitor is an annual report from the Texas Birth Defects Epidemiology and Surveillance Branch (the Branch). The Branch oversees the Texas Birth Defects Registry (TBDR). The mission of the TBDR is to better understand birth defects in Texas. The purpose of this report is to share data updates about birth defects.

### **Congenital Syphilis**

Congenital syphilis (CS) is on the rise in the United States and in Texas. Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease and can be passed from a mother to her baby during pregnancy or during childbirth. When this happens, it is called congenital syphilis. Congenital syphilis in a baby can cause very serious health issues like birth defects or death.

It is important for pregnant women to get tested for syphilis. If a pregnant woman has syphilis, she can get treatment. Getting treatment can cure syphilis and reduce the risk of passing it on to the baby. Recently, Texas passed a law that requires testing for syphilis during pregnancy. TBDR collects data about infants born with congenital syphilis and a birth defect. The Branch has been sharing data about congenital syphilis cases with the HIV/STD program at DSHS. By sharing data, we can better understand trends in congenital syphilis .

### **Survival of Infants with Birth Defects**

A recent study using TBDR data looked at the survival of children with birth defects. The study found that babies who are born preterm (born before 37 weeks gestation) had lower survival rates. Babies who only had one defect had higher survival compared to babies with more than one defect. Also, survival rates increased in recent years for some defects. Survival for infants with birth defects may be increasing because of medical advances.

### **Connecting Children with Birth Defects to Genetic Counseling**

The Branch connects young children with birth defects to DSHS social workers. The social workers help families get connected to health and social service programs. Recently, social workers began asking the families if they have ever met with a geneticist. A geneticist is a doctor who focuses on how genes impact health. A geneticist can help families understand their child's birth defect better. Social workers found that most families (67%) had not seen a geneticist before.

### **More updates from the Branch:**

- Created new job positions for lead surveillance specialists.
- Creating a training program for all new surveillance specialists. This will allow for consistent training among specialists. This training will be provided to new staff.
- TBDR will no longer include surveillance of births at military facilities. This change starts with babies born in 2022.
- January is National Birth Defects Awareness Month. This is a time to raise awareness about birth defects.

