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California Department of Public Health



GAVIN NEWSOM  
Governor

December 23, 2020

Dear Colleague,

In recent months, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has received increasing reports of disseminated gonococcal infections (DGI), an uncommon but severe complication of untreated gonorrhea. CDPH is working with local health departments to investigate these cases of DGI, where some of the patients have reported experiencing homelessness and/or using illicit drugs, particularly methamphetamine. A similar increase in cases was noted in Michigan in late 2019 and reported through a [dear colleague letter](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

DGI occurs when the sexually transmitted pathogen *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* invades the bloodstream and spreads to distant sites in the body, leading to clinical manifestations such as septic arthritis, polyarthralgia, tenosynovitis, petechial/pustular skin lesions, bacteremia, or, on rare occasions, endocarditis or meningitis. Patients have initially presented with joint pain attributed to another cause, which was only later determined to be due to DGI. Please obtain a social history that includes a sexual and drug use history, as well as housing status, for patients reporting joint pain. If there is clinical suspicion for DGI, nucleic acid amplification test (NAAT) and culture specimens from urogenital and extragenital (e.g., pharyngeal and rectal) mucosal sites, as applicable, should be collected and processed, in addition to NAAT and culture specimens from disseminated sites of infection (e.g., skin, synovial fluid, blood, cerebrospinal fluid).

It is possible the increase in DGI cases reflects a decrease of STD screening, testing and treatment as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to a more virulent strain of GC being transmitted. **Medical providers should reinstate routine screening recommendations for STDs in females <25 years of age, pregnant females, men who have sex with men and individuals with HIV. Additionally, providers should increase their clinical suspicion for DGI in patients with joint pain and do the following:**

- **Manage DGI cases per the [CDC STD Treatment Guidelines](#).** NAAT **and** culture specimens at genital and extragenital (i.e., pharyngeal and rectal) sites should be obtained before initiating empiric antimicrobial treatment for patients with suspected DGI. Hospitalization and consultation with an infectious disease specialist when available are recommended for initial therapy.
- **Test all *N. gonorrhoeae* isolates from DGI cases for antimicrobial susceptibility**, which requires culture. Please contact your local health department for guidance on obtaining

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culture if not available at your site. CDC is interested in receiving all clinical isolates from DGI cases for additional testing. Please work with your laboratory facility to ensure all available isolates from DGI cases are sent to the local public health laboratory and not discarded.

- **Report all laboratory confirmed and clinically suspected cases of DGI to the local health department within 24 hours of identification.** Clinical consultation for DGI management is available through the [STD Clinical Consultation Network](#).
- ***CDPH is interested in hearing about any suspected cases of DGI, and CDC is asking to collect all clinical isolates from DGI cases for additional testing.*** Medical providers and laboratories should send any clinical isolates (i.e. positive gonorrhea cultures) from DGI patients to their local health departments in order to submit them to the CDC.
- **Instruct patients to refer sex partners with whom they have had sexual contact in the past 60 days for evaluation, testing, and presumptive treatment for *N. gonorrhoeae*.** Notify patients that they may receive a call from the public health department.
- **Prioritize routine screening, testing, and treatment for STDs** per the [2020 Update to CDC's Treatment for Gonococcal Infections](#), which supersedes the gonorrhea treatment recommendations included in the [CDC 2015 STD Treatment Guidelines](#). When facility-based and in-person clinical services are limited, follow guidance from the [CDC dear colleague letter](#) on STD care and prevention during disruption of clinical services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When reporting suspected and confirmed cases of DGI to your local health department, provide information on the signs, symptoms (including date of onset), site(s) of infection, and treatment. In addition, please include sociodemographic information, such as race/ethnicity, gender of sex partners, and whether the person is experiencing homelessness or using drugs. Providers can use the CDC [DGI Case Reporting Form](#) to send the requested information to their local health department. Please reach out to your local health department for further questions on DGI and reporting requirements.

Thank you for your assistance and work toward ensuring the health of all Californians.

Sincerely,



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## **RESOURCES**

- California Department of Public Health STD Control Branch: <http://www.std.ca.gov/>  
o Gonorrhea page:  
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Gonorrhea.aspx>
- CDC Dear Colleague Letter - Increasing Reports of DGI:  
[https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/DGI\\_De ar Colleague Letter.pdf](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/DGI_De ar Colleague Letter.pdf)
- Disseminated Gonococcal Infection Working Case Definition:  
[https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/DGI\\_C ase Definition.pdf](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/DGI_C ase Definition.pdf)
- CDC DGI Case Reporting form:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/std/program/outbreakresources/DGICaseReportingForm-508.pdf>
- Dear Colleague Letter: STD Care and Prevention Guidance During Disruption of Clinical Services due to the COVID-19 pandemic (April 6, 2020)  
<https://www.cdc.gov/std/dstdp/DCL-STDTreatment-COVID19-04062020.pdf>
- CDC 2020 Update to Treatment for Gonococcal Infections:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6950a6.htm>
- Transportation of Specimens for Culture of *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*  
[https://www.aphl.org/programs/infectious\\_disease/std/Pages/N-gonorrhoeae-and-C-trachomatis.aspx](https://www.aphl.org/programs/infectious_disease/std/Pages/N-gonorrhoeae-and-C-trachomatis.aspx)
- Recommendations for the Laboratory-Based Detection of *C. trachomatis* and *N. gonorrhoeae* – 2014:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/std/laboratory/2014labrec/default.htm>