Having been almost eliminated in the US, syphilis rates have increased dramatically in the past 10 years, particularly among gay and bisexual men. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a summary of this in the May 9th issue of Morbidity and Mortality Weekly, which highlights the remarkable rise in cases since 2005. From 2005 to 2013, the number of cases of primary and secondary syphilis cases in the US almost doubled, and men, particularly men who have sex with men (MSM), make up the majority of cases.

In Santa Barbara County, there has also been a large rise in cases, with a four-fold increase over the past 3 years (see below). The STD Control Program at the Public Health Department is addressing this problem with expanded community education activities, strengthening collaboration with our community health partners, promoting and facilitating Patient Directed Partner Therapy, and actively investigating/researching recent cases to help better understand the situation locally.

Increases in STDs are a major public health concern and everyone has a role to play in reversing this trend. We ask all providers in Santa Barbara County to help by 1) urging safer sexual practices (e.g. reduce the number of sex partners, use latex condoms, and have a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has negative test results for sexually transmitted diseases), 2) promoting syphilis awareness and screening as well as appropriate screening for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV infection and 3) assisting in treatment and notification of sex partners.
The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Environmental Health Investigations Branch has issued a health alert due to multiple cases of mercury poisoning caused by certain skin-lightening or acne creams from Mexico. The CDPH Food and Drug Laboratory found these creams to contain very high levels of mercury, up to 210,000 parts per million (ppm), or 21 percent. In the United States, it is illegal to sell skin cream products that contain 1 ppm or more of mercury.

The products under investigation come in plastic containers that have either no label or a hand-made label. They were purchased on the street in California cities through informal networks of friends or brought into the United States from Mexico. The creams are non-commercial and are used for lightening the skin; fading freckles, blemishes, and age spots; and treating acne.

CDPH is asking medical providers to consider mercury poisoning when diagnosing patients with any of the signs and symptoms listed on page 1 of this health alert, which is available at: http://www.ehib.org/papers/Health_Alert%20Mercury_Poisonings_from_Mexican_creams_5_2014.pdf.

The entire health alert includes summary information; signs and symptoms of inorganic mercury poisoning; examples of cases in California; sources and examples of products; information about mercury absorption and toxicity; information about home contamination; guidance for medical testing, medical treatment and follow-up, and disposal; additional background information; and links to further information. A comprehensive list of resources, including multi-lingual fact sheets and public service announcements, is available at: http://www.ehib.org/paper.jsp?paper_key=MSKC. (source CDPH)