



## Letter to the Editor

### The emerging outbreak of syphilis infections in Japan: A public health concern

**Victor Abiola Adepoju<sup>1</sup>, ABM Alauddin Chowdhury<sup>2</sup>, Safayet Jamil<sup>\*2</sup>**

*1- Department of HIV and Infectious Diseases, Jhpiego (An Affiliate of John Hopkins University), Abuja 900271, Nigeria.*

*2- Department of Public Health, Daffodil International University, Dhaka 1216, Bangladesh*

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#### To the Editor

We write to direct our concern towards the sudden outbreak of syphilis infections in Japan as reported by NHK web news on January 12, 2023. The preliminary statistics show that last year's syphilis infections reached a staggering number of 13,000, marking a 1.6-fold rise from the previous year and an all-time high since the current method of record-keeping was implemented [1]. This dramatic increase in syphilis cases is a severe public health concern as syphilis is a bacterial infection primarily spread through sexual contact and if left untreated can result in severe symptoms. The alarming rise in syphilis cases, from a mere 875 in 2012 to a staggering 15 times that number in just a decade, calls for immediate action. Specialists suggest that while a portion of the infected individuals are sex workers and clients, it's plausible that the infection is spreading through sexual intercourse with unidentified people met through the internet. The statement clarifies that the incidence of syphilis is positively associated with dating app use in Japan [2].

Furthermore, another study conducted in Japan noted that the increase in syphilis cases cannot be attributed to the presence of HIV. This emphasizes the need for further research to understand the underlying causes of the increase in syphilis infections in Japan. Additionally, the study by Kanai et al. highlighted the difficulties in preventing congenital syphilis cases in Japan [3]. The study found that the number of congenital syphilis cases had increased in 2016-2017, and preventing this disease is a significant challenge that needs to be addressed. Nishiki et al. added that most syphilis infections between 2017-2018 were among heterosexual women 20-29 years with a history of STIs and multiple sexual partners further suggesting the need for targeted syphilis education among high-risk women [4]. Also, following genomic sequencing of *Treponema pallidum* in 2021, the authors observed the similarity between the Japanese strain and the European and East African strains suggesting that migration and international travel may also account for the surge in syphilis infection in Japan [5]. The rise in syphilis cases is a global concern, but Japan has seen a particularly sharp increase. Unlike Western Europe and North America, where the rise is largely associated with men who have sex with men (MSM), the surge in syphilis cases in Japan also involves reproductive-aged women and heterosexual relationships [5]. Cultural factors, such as less frequent condom use and the stigma associated with sexually transmitted infections, could contribute to

the excess risk in Japan. Public health strategies should consider these unique demographic and cultural factors for more effective intervention. To sum up, the recent rise in syphilis infections in Japan is a multifaceted problem that requires a holistic approach to address. This includes educating the public about the hazards of syphilis, promoting safe sex practices, international screening and testing, cross-country collaboration, and making sure that those who are infected have access to effective treatment and support. The government and public health officials take immediate action to address this issue and invest in research to better understand the underlying causes of the increase in syphilis infections in Japan. Furthermore, the public health sector collaborates with the private sector, particularly dating apps, and social media platforms, to ensure that the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is curbed.

In conclusion, the recent spike in syphilis infections in Japan is a critical public health concern that requires immediate attention. A comprehensive approach, including education, promotion of safe sex practices, and access to effective treatment, is required to address this issue. Collaboration with the migration department and between the public and private sector is also vital in curbing the spread of syphilis in Japan.

## References

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