



# Sexually Transmitted Infections in Alaska

Among Alaska Native/American Indian People: 2015-2020

1st edition March 2023



**Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium**

3900 Ambassador Drive, Anchorage, AK 99508

---

[anepicenter@anthc.org](mailto:anepicenter@anthc.org) • [www.anthctoday.org/epicenter](http://www.anthctoday.org/epicenter)



## Introduction

This report provides an overview of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among Alaska Native/American Indian people in Alaska. Comparisons with non-Alaska Native/American Indian people highlight areas where disparities might exist.

## Methods

Alaska non-Native incidence rates were calculated using the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP) AtlasPlus incident case data and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development population data. To calculate the Alaska non-Native incident case counts, the Alaska Native/American Indian incident case counts were subtracted from the total incident case counts for each year. The Alaska non-Native incident case counts were then divided by the Alaska non-Native population size aged 13-years-or-older, for each year, and multiplied by 100,000. This methodology follows the approach utilized by the CDC to calculate the race-specific incidence rates reported in CDC's AtlasPlus<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout this report, the following terms are used interchangeably for space consideration reasons: "Alaska Native/American Indian people" and "Alaska Native People".

Data are suppressed when there are fewer than 5 cases or rates of less than 10 per 100,000. For HIV, case counts are reported instead of incidence rates to align with these data suppression protocols.

## Key Highlights

During 2020, Alaska Native/American Indian people experienced a chlamydia incidence rate 3.8 times higher than the rate for Alaska non-Native people<sup>1</sup>.

During 2020, Alaska Native/American Indian people experienced a gonorrhea incidence rate 3.9 times higher than the rate for Alaska non-Native people<sup>1</sup>.

During 2017-2020, the number of primary, secondary, and non-primary non-secondary syphilis cases reported among Alaska Native people increased from <5 in 2017 to 145 in 2020<sup>1</sup>.

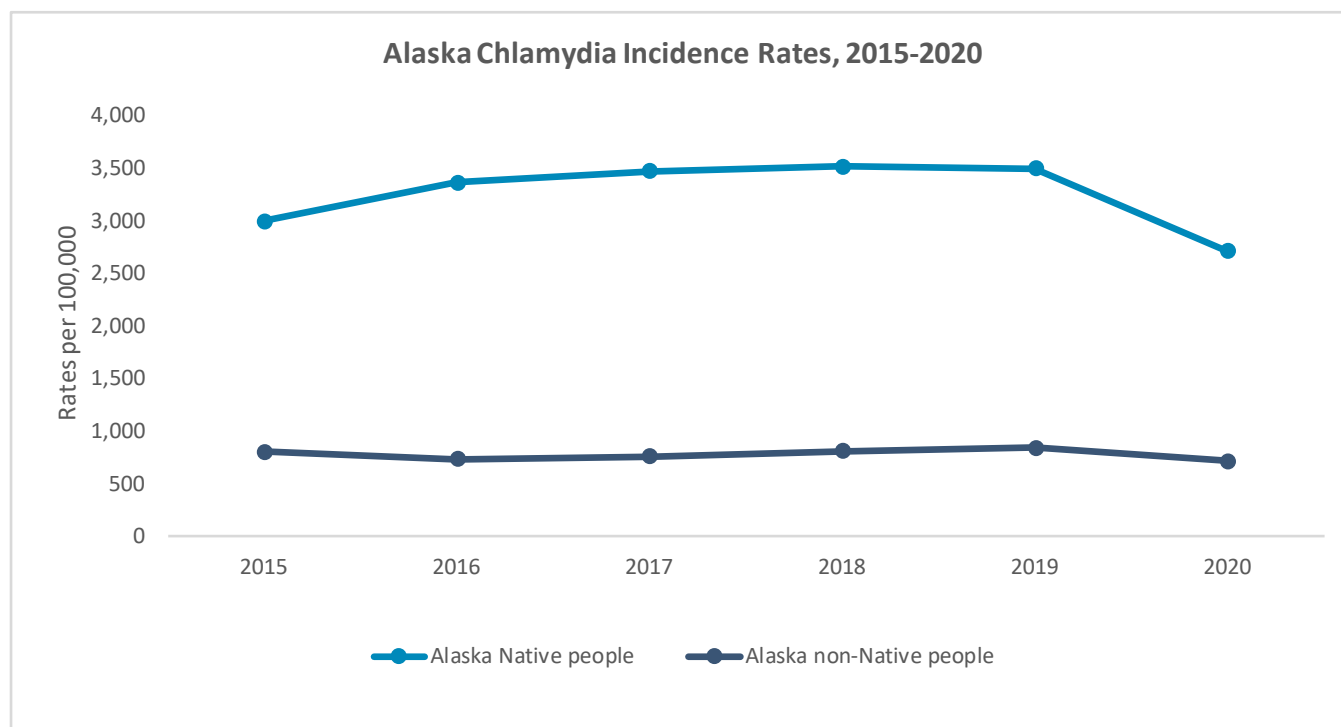
## Chlamydia

Chlamydia (CT) is a sexually transmitted infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*. CT is the most commonly reported bacterial cause of sexually transmitted infection in the United States. Most people with CT do not have symptoms. Untreated CT can lead to permanent damage of the reproductive system<sup>2</sup>.

During 2020, Alaska had the third highest statewide CT incidence rate of any US state (696 per 100,000). Mississippi (804 per 100,000) and Louisiana (710 per 100,000) ranked number one and two, respectively.

During 2019, Alaska Native/American Indian people in Alaska had a CT incidence rate of 3,500 per 100,000. This incidence rate declined by more than 22% in 2020 to 2,715 per 100,000, 3.8 times higher than Alaska non-Native people (718 per 100,000), and 5.6 times the US national rate (481 per 100,000)<sup>1</sup>.

Due to impacts of COVID-19 on access to care, this decline may not truly represent a reduction of infection burden. Infections were likely underreported, and increased STI transmission might have occurred. These effects might persist for several years, and we might not ever know what the full impact of the pandemic was on STIs. Public health experts agree, however, that the status of STIs in the US, including in Alaska, has not improved and continued prevention and control efforts remain important<sup>3</sup>.



*Data Source: CDC. NCHHSTP AtlasPlus.*

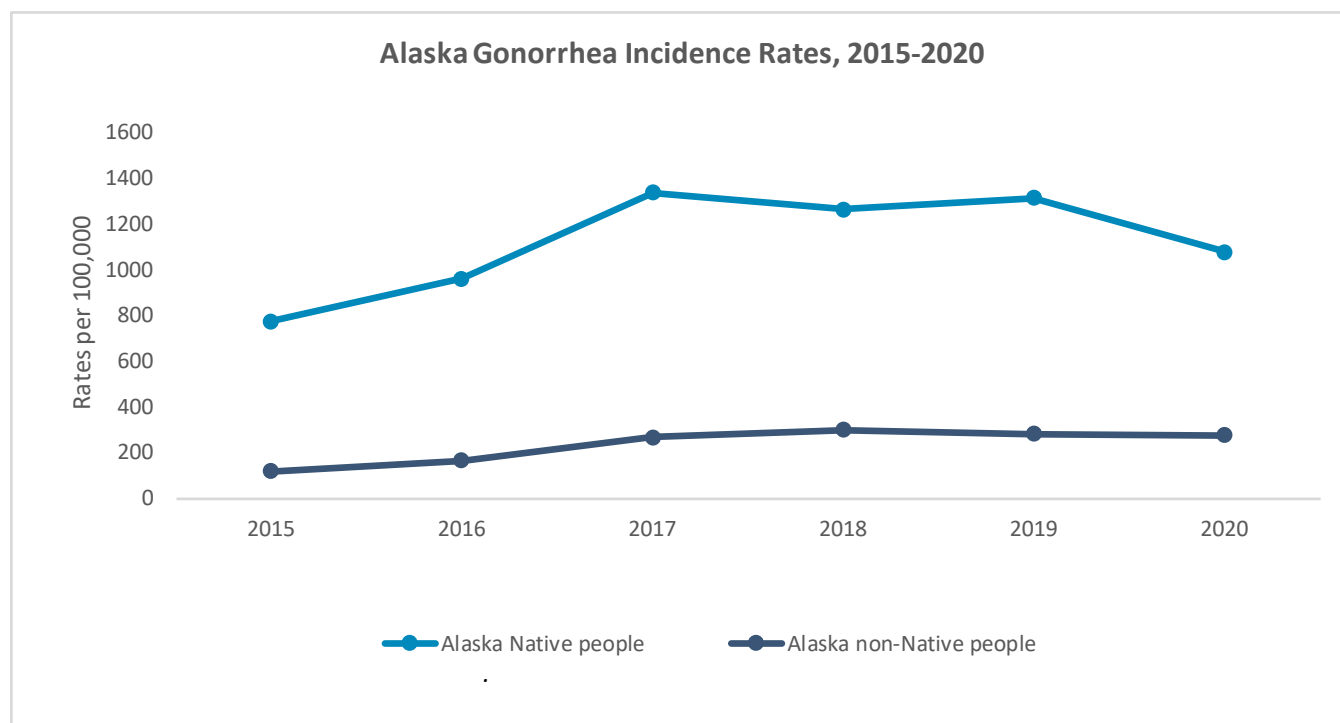
## Gonorrhea

Gonorrhea (GC) is a sexually transmitted infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, an obligate human pathogen. GC is the second most commonly reported bacterial cause of sexually transmitted infection in the United States. It can infect both men and women and can cause infections in the genitals, rectum, and throat. Untreated GC can lead to permanent damage of the reproductive system<sup>4</sup>.

During 2020, Alaska had the eighth highest statewide GC incidence rate of any US state (271 per 100,000). Mississippi had the highest rate (463 per 100,000)<sup>1</sup>.

In 2019, Alaska Native/American Indian people in Alaska had a GC incidence rate of 1,315 per 100,000, which declined by nearly 18% in 2020 to 1,078 per 100,000, 3.9 times higher compared with Alaska non-Native people (276 per 100,000), and about 5 times the US national rate (207 per 100,000)<sup>1</sup>.

However, as was previously noted, declines observed during 2020 might not represent a reduction of infection burden, but rather COVID-19 pandemic impacts on access to care<sup>3</sup>.



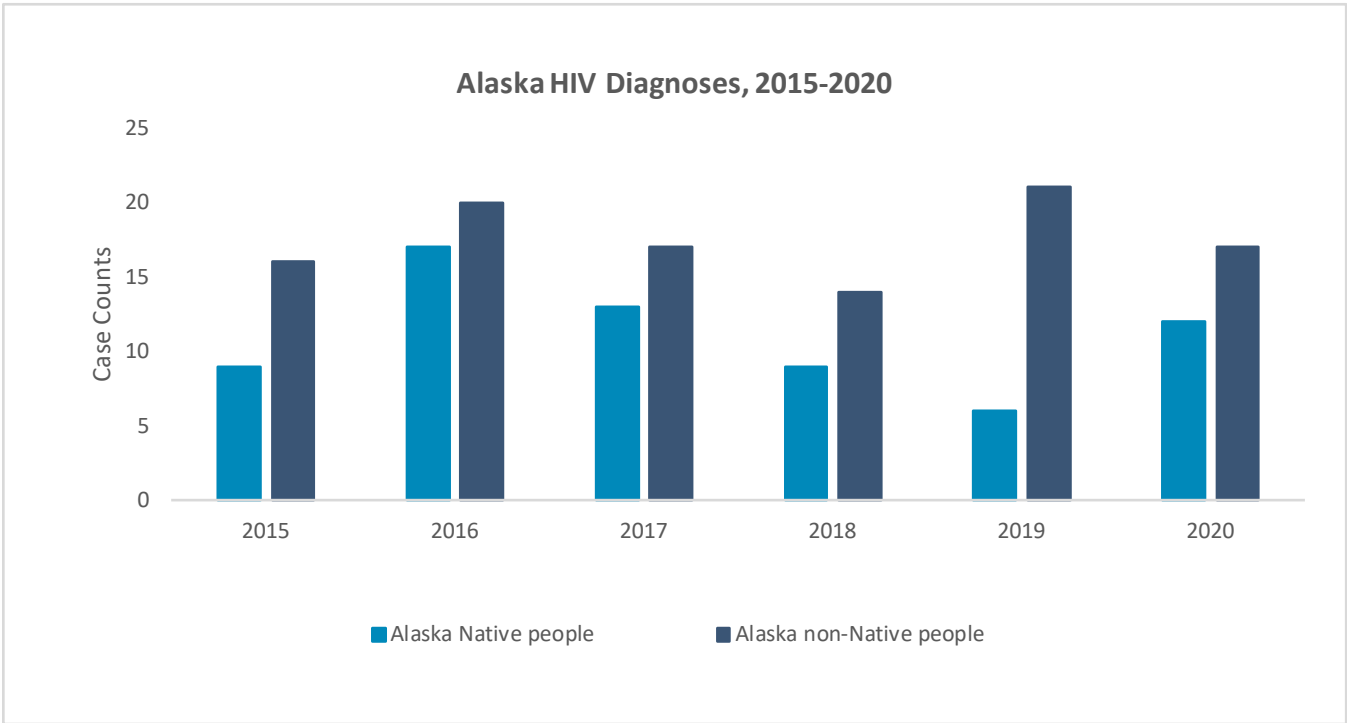
Data Source: CDC. NCHHSTP AtlasPlus.

# HIV/AIDS

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a retrovirus that attacks the body’s immune system. Without treatment, it causes the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) that is the last stage of HIV disease<sup>5</sup>. Incidence of HIV often refers to newly diagnosed cases, rather than new infections. This is because HIV diagnosis might be delayed due to initial asymptomatic infection. Prevalence describes the number of people living with HIV. Since there is no cure for HIV and it is a lifelong disease, prevalence of HIV has increased, even while incidence has decreased, due to antiretroviral treatment options helping people live longer with the disease<sup>6</sup>.

During 2008-2020, there were 121 incident cases of HIV reported among Alaska Native/American Indian people in Alaska. In the same timeframe, 169 Alaska Native/American Indian people were known to have died with HIV, and 129 were known to have died with AIDS<sup>1</sup>.

During 2020, among Alaska Native/American Indian people, there were 12 reported incident cases of HIV, 195 known prevalent cases of HIV, and 101 known prevalent cases of AIDS, for a total of 308 AN/AI people living with HIV-related disease<sup>1</sup>.



Data Source: CDC. NCHHSTP AtlasPlus.



## Syphilis

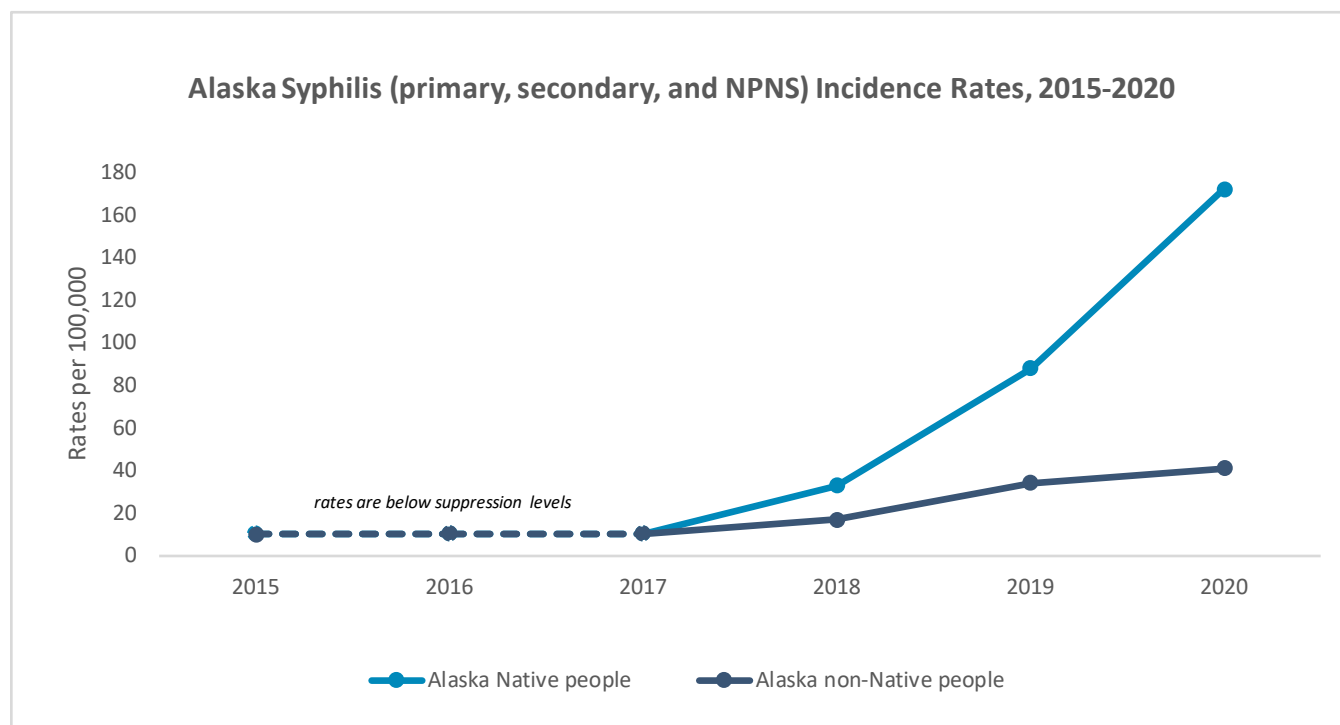
Syphilis infection is caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*<sup>7</sup>. Syphilis is considered a sexually transmitted disease because the infection is usually transmitted via sexual contact, including vaginal, anal (anogenital), and oral (orogenital) contact<sup>7</sup>. It is rare for syphilis to be transmitted through nonsexual contact (e.g. skin-to-skin, blood transfusion, or needle sharing). Syphilis can also be transmitted during pregnancy or during birth, resulting in congenital syphilis<sup>8</sup>.

Syphilis infection progresses through 4 stages: primary (first infection, lasts up to 3 weeks); secondary (2-12 weeks from initial infection); early non-primary non-secondary (NPNS) (<12 months); and late (>12 months from initial infection which can last for years)<sup>7</sup>.

During 2020, 47% (145 of 306 cases) of newly reported syphilis (primary, secondary, and NPNS) infections statewide were among Alaska Native/American Indian persons<sup>1</sup>. A syphilis outbreak was officially declared by the State of Alaska's Section of Epidemiology in 2018, due to rising cases among all racial/ethnic groups<sup>9</sup>. Syphilis case counts have been increasing annually among Alaska Native/American Indian people since at least 2017, when there were <5 reported cases<sup>1</sup>.

During 2020, the syphilis incidence rate (excluding congenital syphilis) for Alaska Native/American Indian people (172 per 100,000) was 4.2 times higher compared with Alaska non-Native people (41 per 100,000), and also 4.2 times the US national rate (41 per 100,000)<sup>1</sup>.

According to the State of Alaska's Section of Epidemiology, during 2020 34% of individuals diagnosed with syphilis were also diagnosed with at least one other STI or had known HIV infection<sup>9</sup>.



Data Source: CDC. NCHHSTP AtlasPlus.



## **Alaska Resources and Programs**

STI prevention and early diagnosis can help reduce the spread of disease and improve patient outcomes. The next page contains a list of some available resources.



## **I Want the Kit**

IWantTheKit.org (IWTK) is a self-testing service provided by ANTHC for any Alaskan age 13 and over. The kits test for Chlamydia, Gonorrhea and Trichomonas. It is an easy to use, confidential, web based service. Johns Hopkins University manages the requests, mail outs, and performs the lab testing. ANTHC advertises the service and provides a nurse case manager who manages follow up of all positive results, ensuring participants with positive results are treated promptly and correctly. Follow up includes referrals for treatment and additional STI screening, such as syphilis and HIV, and reporting reportable positive results to the State of AK health department. There is no cost to participants for the kits, testing, or follow-up case management or linkage to care, however, treatment costs are not covered by IWTK.

## **Early Intervention Services (EIS)**

ANTHC's Early Intervention Services provides medical care and case management to people living with and at risk for HIV and AIDS. The Program is housed within the ANMC Internal Medicine clinic and funded in part by Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Part C. EIS also provides field clinic visits to some regional Tribal Health Organizations around the State of Alaska to provide care to patients closer to their home. Call (907) 729-2907.

Alaska AETC (AIDS Education Training Center Program) trains clinicians to provide HIV prevention and medical management. This EIS program includes comprehensive HIV education, ongoing support and clinical consultation. It is available to all providers in Alaska. Email, [AETC@anthc.org](mailto:AETC@anthc.org).

Alaska Infectious Disease ECHO: HCV, HIV, PrEP and common STIs aims to increase provider knowledge about prevention strategies, screening, diagnosing, treatment, and management of hepatitis C (HCV), HIV, PrEP, and common STIs. The EIS ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is held the second Tuesday of each month at noon. Email [AKIDECHO@anthc.org](mailto:AKIDECHO@anthc.org).

## **iKnowMine**

iKnowMine (IKM) is a program that offers free education, resources and supplies for HIV and STI testing and prevention, as well as Native holistic health and well-being. Through the [iknowmine.org](http://iknowmine.org) website, Alaskans can access STI and HIV testing resources, such as the IWTK program and free OraQuick rapid HIV testing kits, as well as prevention supplies, such as condoms, dental dams, and safer substance use supplies such as syringes. HIV/STI education and technical assistance for educators and medical and social services providers is also available from IKM upon request.

## **Healthy Native Youth**

HealthyNativeYouth.org (HNY) is a website containing free health promotion curricula and resources for adults who care for Native youth. The resources and curricula offered on the site aim to promote positive youth development in a culturally relevant and effective way. Additional resources available include technical support for curriculum implementation, community of practice learning sessions, text message support lines, and more.

## **State of Alaska HIV/STD Prevention Program**

The HIV/STD Program provides HIV and STI education and technical assistance to educators, and medical and social services providers upon request. Provider, patient, and community resources can be found at, <https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/hivstd>.

## **Syringe Service Programs**

Syringe Service Programs are organizations that generally provide community education and training, care coordination, safer substance use supplies distribution and disposal, HIV/STI testing, and more. Example organizations include Alaskan AIDS Assistance Association (4As) in Anchorage/Mat-Su, Interior AIDS Association in Fairbanks, The Exchange in Homer, The Front Street Clinic in Juneau, and the YKHC Outpatient Clinic in Bethel.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NCHHSTP AtlasPlus. Retrieved December 2022 from [www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/atlas/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/atlas/index.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Chlamydia—CDC Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/std/chlamydia/stdfact-chlamydia.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/chlamydia/stdfact-chlamydia.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2020—Impact of COVID-19 on STDs. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2021/impact.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2021/impact.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Gonorrhea—CDC Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/std/gonorrhea/stdfact-gonorrhea.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/gonorrhea/stdfact-gonorrhea.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). HIV—CDC Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/whatishiv.html](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/whatishiv.html)
- <sup>6</sup> Jones, J., Sullivan, P. S., & Curran, J. W. (2019). Progress in the HIV epidemic: Identifying goals and measuring success. *PLoS medicine*, 16(1), e1002729. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002729>
- <sup>7</sup> Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Syphilis—CDC detailed factsheet. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis-detailed.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis-detailed.htm)
- <sup>8</sup> Tudor ME, Al Aboud AM, Gossman W. Syphilis. (2022). Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK534780>
- <sup>9</sup> State of Alaska Division of Public Health Section of Epidemiology. (21 June 2021). Syphilis outbreak update—Alaska 2020. Bulletin no. 8. Retrieved from [http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2021\\_08.pdf](http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2021_08.pdf)





ALASKA NATIVE  
TRIBAL HEALTH  
CONSORTIUM

**Alaska Native Epidemiology Center**

[anepicenter@anthc.org](mailto:anepicenter@anthc.org) • [www.anthctoday.org/epicenter](http://www.anthctoday.org/epicenter)

**Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium**

3900 Ambassador Drive, Anchorage, AK 99508