

Syphilis diagnosis in the obstetrical population in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Objective

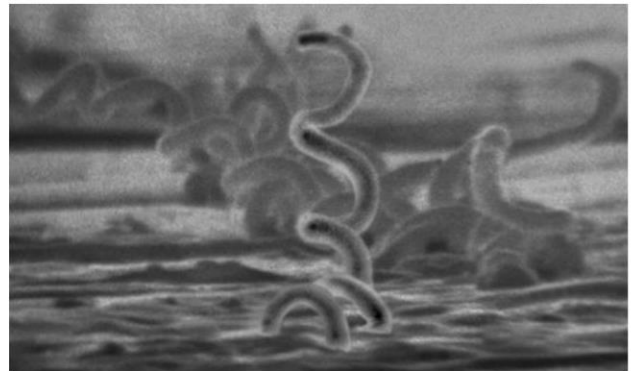
Syphilis diagnosis in pregnancy is essential to prenatal care because of the severe complications the disease can cause in the fetus and mother. Globally, syphilis rates in pregnancy are on the rise, particularly in low-income countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted syphilis diagnosis rates in pregnant women, as many healthcare facilities have been forced to reduce their services or close altogether. The pandemic has directly affected the obstetric population to access testing and treatment for syphilis, increasing the vertical transition and fetal complications of the infection. This study aimed to determine the prevalence of Syphilis in pregnant women and the adequacy of diagnosis in prenatal care.

Methods

We conducted two studies (2020 & 2022) with postpartum women with a self-answered questionnaire about access to health facilities and collected data from prenatal care registers. To complement the information collected, we researched the data on Syphilis in pregnant women from the Brazilian official data. The data's last actualization was in June 2021, so we duplicated the obtained number to obtain a proxy of the cases in 2021.

Results

Our sample collected data from 416 women (196 in 2020 and 220 in 2022), and 38 (9,1%) were diagnosed with Syphilis. However, only 299 participants (71,9%) were tested for syphilis appropriately. We didn't find differences between the analyzed years (2020 and 2022). We found a difference between the two groups (appropriately tested for syphilis x not appropriately tested for Syphilis) in the mean number of prenatal care consultations (6,42 (SD3,07) x 8,44 (SD2,78)) and gestational age at the beginning of prenatal care (10,4 (SD 5,75) x 12,21 (SD 7,9)) with a p value of 0,001 and 0,01 respectively. Brazilian official data show a rise in Syphilis diagnoses in pregnant women from 2015 to 2018, with a slight drop from 2018 to 2020 and a sharp drop in 2021. The lack of data can explain this decrease (we make an approximation with half of the 2021 year data). Other reasons could be fewer pregnant persons diagnosed or fewer cases reported to the official record data system. Far to be good news, this can represent a pitfall in the assistance, as our local data show.



Public domain image: Electron micrograph of the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, which causes syphilis. Source: Simone Lemos / USP Journal. Photo: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Representative image of prenatal care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://www.paho.org/pt/noticias/2-3-2022-um-terco-das-mulheres-gravidas-com-covid-19-nao-consegue-acessar-cuidados>.

Conclusion

Syphilis is a potentially dangerous infection for the fetus, and the prevalence in the pregnant population in Brazil increased until 2018 and slowly declined after that. Since 2020, the number of cases has declined, but regional data shows the difficulty in proper diagnosis during prenatal care.