

Epidemiological trends in notified syphilis diagnoses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

How the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the incidence of syphilis remains unclear.¹⁻⁴ We extracted data from the Brazilian Unified Health System public disease notification database to compare the mean number of syphilis cases reported from March to December 2017–2019 with those reported the same period of 2020. In all Brazilian macroregions, the incidence rates of syphilis per million population increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching +157% in the Southeast (table 1). The mean increase was +78% overall, corresponding to an additional 161 incident cases per million population.

The data suggest that the social distancing measures adopted during the pandemic were not capable of interfering with general sexual behaviours in Brazil. The observed increase in the number of syphilis cases should be further investigated to assist with decision-making processes and the programming of health measures.

Célia Márcia Fernandes Maia,¹
Nelson Pereira Marques ,²

Verônica Oliveira Dias,³
Daniella R. Barbosa Martelli,³
Eduardo Araújo Oliveira,^{4,5}
Hercílio Martelli-Júnior^{3,6}

¹Postgraduate Program in Health Sciences, State University of Montes Claros, UNIMONTES, Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brazil

²Department of Oral Diagnosis, State University of Campinas, Piracicaba, Brazil

³Primary Care Postgraduate Program, Montes Claros State University, Montes Claros, Brazil

⁴Department of Pediatrics, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

⁵Nephrology Department, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, California, USA

⁶Center for Rehabilitation of Craniofacial Anomalies, Jose do Rosario Vellano University, Alfenas, Minas Gerais, Brazil

Correspondence to Dr Nelson Pereira Marques, Department of Oral Diagnosis, State University of Campinas, Piracicaba, SP, Brazil; neomarques@hotmail.com

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Contributors CMFM: conceptualisation; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; roles/writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. NPM: conceptualisation; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; roles/writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. VOD: conceptualisation; formal analysis; writing—review and editing. DRBM: conceptualisation; formal analysis; writing—review and editing. EAO: formal analysis; investigation; methodology; writing—review and editing. HM-J: conceptualisation; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; supervision; roles/writing—original draft; writing—review and editing.

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ORCID iD

Nelson Pereira Marques <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4748-6760>

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Table 1 Incident cases of syphilis (per million population) reported by the Brazilian public health system between March and December of 2017, 2018 and 2019 (reported as mean incidence rate) and in the same period of 2020

Regions of Brazil	Mean incidence rate in 2017–2019 (95% CI)	Incidence rate in 2020 (95% CI)	Difference in incidence rate* (%)	Incidence rate ratio	P value†
North	253 (245 to 270)	468 (458 to 478)	+215 (+85)	1.8	<0.001
Northeast	191 (188 to 195)	251 (247 to 255)	+60 (+31)	1.3	<0.001
Southeast	141 (138 to 143)	361 (358 to 366)	+220 (+157)	2.6	<0.001
South	326 (319.2 to 332.3)	441 (433 to 448)	+115 (+35)	1.4	<0.001
Midwest	270 (261.1 to 277.6)	555 (544 to 567)	+285 (+106)	2.1	<0.001
Total	206 (203.3 to 207.6)	367 (364 to 369)	+161 (+78)	1.8	<0.001

Source: elaborated by the author.

*Mean incidence rate in 2017–2019 was compared with the incidence rate in 2020 by a 'test-based method' with the Medcalc statistical software.

†P value obtained by χ^2 statistic.