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# United States' syphilis rate hits all-time low, CDC says

ATLANTA (AP) — The syphilis rate in the United States dropped 19 percent last year to an all-time low, the government reported yesterday as it launched a push to stamp out the sexually transmitted disease altogether.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the rate of new cases in 1998 was 2.6 per 100,000 people, down from 3.2 a year earlier. Half of the 6,993 cases reported came from 28 counties, or less than 1 percent of all U.S. counties. Most of the 28 counties were urban. About 80 percent of all counties reported no new cases.

"Clearly we have wrestled syphilis to the ground, and now we have to put it in lockhold from which it won't escape," Dr. Judith Wasserheit, director of the CDC's sexually transmitted disease prevention division, said. "We have an unprecedented window of opportunity to eliminate syphilis in the United States because rates are at an all-time low and because the dis-

ease now is extremely concentrated geographically."

The drop has been attributed, in part, to increased funding for treatment and safe-sex practices prompted by the outbreak of AIDS, such as using condoms and having fewer partners.

The South had the highest rate at 5.1 per 100,000 and accounted for 19 of the 28 counties that had the highest number of cases. The rate was higher among blacks — 17.1 per 100,000 compared with 0.5 among whites. But the disparity has narrowed since the beginning of this decade, when rates among blacks were 64 times those of whites.

"Syphilis, like many other health problems, tends to persist in communities that are plagued by a number of social problems including poverty, lack of access to health care and racism," Wasserheit said.

The syphilis rate has been declining in the United States since 1990, when it peaked at 50,578 cases, or 20.3 cases per 100,000.

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that starts with painless sores and then a rash and can attack the heart and brain and cause dementia and death. It can be cured if treated early with antibiotics.

Surgeon General David Satcher and CDC Director Jeffrey Koplan were to join other national and local public health officials in Nashville, Tenn., yesterday to announce the CDC's new initiative to eliminate syphilis.

The plan, aimed at areas with a heavy burden of syphilis cases or a potential for re-emergence, calls for closer monitoring, more community involvement, quicker response to outbreaks and greater access to health care for those infected or exposed.

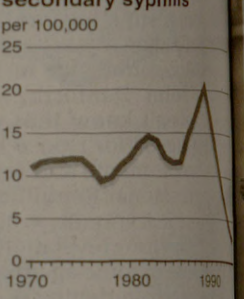
The government is hoping to reduce syphilis cases to a rate of 0.4 per 100,000 by 2005.

Nashville, Indianapolis and Raleigh, N.C., are the three initial sites where the plan will be put into effect.

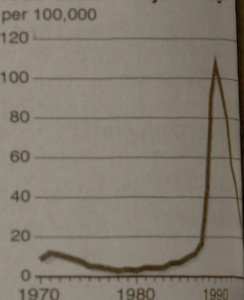
## Stopping syphilis

A drop in the syphilis rate has been attributed in part to safe sex practices and increased funding for treatment.

### Cases of primary and secondary syphilis per 100,000



### Cases of syphilis in infants less than one year of age per 100,000



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

# Officials try to ease fear of genetically engineered crops

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal regulators responsible for ensuring the safety of genetically engineered crops sought yesterday to dispel concerns that hazardous biotech products could reach the market.

"Our regulatory system is based on the most rigorous scientific information available, is credible, is defensible and will serve to protect the environment and public health," Jane Anderson, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official, told the Senate Agriculture Committee.

The EPA is one of three agencies responsible for regulating genetically modified crops and foods, with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Agriculture Department.

"We're very confident about the assurances that are put forward," said James Maryanski, biotechnology coordinator for FDA's food safety office.

Critics of the technology said the agencies depend too heavily on companies to conduct research and report problems, and that the science is not advanced enough to guarantee the safety of the food. Environmental and consumer

groups are pushing the Clinton administration to require the labeling of foods that contain biotech ingredients.

**"We're very confident about the assurances that are put forward."**

— James Maryanski  
biotechnology coordinator, FDA

"We don't know what the products will prove to be in the long run. To say we know is an expression of faith, not of knowledge," Mark Silbergeld, a representative of Consumers Union, said.

Backers of genetic engineering insist it is not fundamentally different from traditional breeding, in which one plant might be cross-pollinated with a wild cousin to produce a hardier va-

riety. Genetic engineering involves splicing a single gene from one organism to another.

A major concern of scientists is that sure transplanted genes do not cause allergic reactions. Biotech ingredients, primarily soybeans and corn, already are in wide use in supermarkets and fast-food restaurants and in everything from tortilla chips to soft baby formula.

When consumers realize that they demand such foods be labeled, Silbergeld said, "They want to make the choice for themselves."

The food industry fears such labeling will stigmatize genetically modified ingredients. The FDA does not consider biotech ingredients fundamentally different from conventional ones and says there is no need for the labeling.

Half the soybeans that U.S. farmers growing this year were engineered to resist a popular weedkiller, and a third of the crop is biotech, having been altered to produce its own pesticide. There also are genetically modified tomatoes, melons and potatoes.

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