Infectious syphilis has reached epidemic proportions in East Baton Rouge Parish and other parts of state, particularly New Orleans, local and state health officials say.

"I'd say it's definitely an epidemic. We noticed the initial increase in New Orleans around the end of 1988 and it spread to the rest of the state in 1989," says Van Jenkins, a public health adviser to Louisiana from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control. "It's kind of overwhelmed us."

Jenkins says that in the three-month period from April through June 1989, 53 cases of infectious syphilis were reported in Baton Rouge. For the same period this year, the number of cases had increased to 129 — a 119 percent increase, Jenkins says.

New Orleans experienced a 14 percent increase in cases for the same period, going from 505 cases in 1989 to 336 cases in 1990, Jenkins says.

Other areas of the state have experienced dramatic increases, although the actual number of cases is less because of smaller populations, Jenkins says. For example, Lafayette recorded only 8 cases for April through June 1989, but jumped to 63 cases for the same period in 1990 — a 562 percent increase, Jenkins says.

Shreveport more than doubled its number of cases, going from 20 in the 1989 quarter to 43 in the same 1990 quarter. Alexandria went from 34 cases in the 1989 quarter to 99 cases in the 1990 quarter, Jenkins says.

As a result of the increase, Jenkins says the Office of Public Health has "changed our priorities to make early syphilis our No. 1 priority for our disease intervention staff."

Jenkins says eight field workers have been added statewide to the public health staff, bringing the total to about 50 — 20 of whom operate out of New Orleans. The field workers are responsible for tracing the spread of the infection, Jenkins says.

"Syphilis has always been one of our top priorities, but now we're spending less time on routine gonorrhea and chlamydia to do syphilis tracking," Jenkins says.

Jenkins and John Thilges, a communicable disease specialist with the Office of Public Health in Baton Rouge, says the marked increase can be somewhat attributed to increased drug use.

"With IV users and crack/cocaine, you see more trading drugs and money for sex than we've ever seen before," Thilges says.

He says such trades make tracking down the infection more difficult "because, to be quite honest with you, particularly in the drug culture, sometimes people don't know who their sex partners are. That is, they don't know where they live or can't tell you enough about them so they can track them down," Thilges says.

Thilges says one of the most disturbing aspects of the epidemic is that many young people — ages 14 to 16 — are involved.

"It seems like in the '80s, when we were first made aware of AIDS, a lot of people got more responsible about their sexual activity. But, all of a sudden in the last three years or so, that's just changed. No one seems to know exactly why," Thilges says.