

March 11, 2019

Health Advisory: Statewide Increases in Hepatitis A Infections

Since January 2018, the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) has identified 170 acute hepatitis A virus (HAV) infections statewide (to date) – more than six times higher than the total of 24 infections identified in 2017. Nearly 60% of the infections have occurred in Northwest and North Georgia as well as the Augusta area. HAV infections are continuing to increase in all three of these districts, indicative of an HAV outbreak. Increases have also been seen in other areas of the state and are being monitored closely.

This mirrors the large HAV outbreaks that have been occurring in other states among injection and non-injection drug users, homeless populations, and men who have sex with men (MSM). In some states, these outbreaks have been characterized by high rates of hospitalizations and deaths. In Georgia, 66% of the identified HAV cases have been hospitalized, 27% were associated with injection drug use, 32% were associated with non-injection illicit drug use, 14% have been among MSM, and 19% were among contacts of a confirmed hepatitis A case.

The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is most commonly spread via close person-to-person transmission through fecal-oral exposure. HAV can also be transmitted through exposure to contaminated food or water. The average incubation period for HAV infection is 15-50 days (average 28 days) and patients are infectious 14 days prior to the onset of symptoms to 7 days after onset of symptoms (or 7 days after onset of jaundice). Symptoms of acute HAV infection can include a discrete onset of nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, fever, diarrhea, headache, clay-colored bowel movements, dark urine, fatigue, malaise, muscle or joint pain, and/or jaundice. Diagnosis of HAV infection must be confirmed through a serologic test for hepatitis A immunoglobulin M (IgM) antibody (i.e., IgM anti-HAV).

Hepatitis A is a vaccine-preventable disease. The best protection against HAV infections and outbreaks is through widespread vaccination, particularly among the populations most at risk. Practicing good hand hygiene, including handwashing after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and when preparing or eating food, also aids in preventing the spread of HAV.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends the following persons be vaccinated against hepatitis A:

- All children at 1 year of age;
- Men who have sex with men;
- Illicit drug users (injection or non-injection);
- Household members and close personal contacts of persons with hepatitis A infection;
- Persons experiencing homelessness;

- Travelers to countries where hepatitis A is common; and
- People with chronic liver disease, including hepatitis B and/or hepatitis C.

A comprehensive list of vaccination recommendations can be found at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>.

Action Steps for Healthcare Providers:

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) encourages healthcare providers to assess patients for increased risk and to **vaccinate patients against HAV infection**. Healthcare providers should also be aware of clinical symptoms of acute HAV infection. Patients with acute HAV infection should be reported *immediately* to your local public health office or by calling 1-866-PUB-HLTH (1-866-782-4584).