



Hepatitis A Summary and Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 9/6/2017

Summary of San Diego Hepatitis A Outbreak, 2017

Since early 2017, the Public Health Services Division, in the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, has been investigating a local Hepatitis A outbreak. The outbreak investigation is currently ongoing. Control of the outbreak has been challenging because of the long time that it takes for the disease to develop (15 to 50 days) after a person is exposed to the infection (i.e., incubation period) and the difficulty of contacting many individuals sickened with the illness who are homeless and/or illicit drug users. The outbreak is being spread person-to-person and through contact with a fecally contaminated environment. No common sources of food, beverage or drugs have been identified that have contributed to this outbreak, though investigation is ongoing. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that [person-to-person transmission](#) through close contact is the primary way people get hepatitis A in the United States. Vaccination efforts are being implemented in targeted locations by County staff and in collaboration with health care partners. For weekly updates on total cases, deaths, hospitalizations, additional educational resources, and the latest public communications (e.g., press releases and health alerts), please go to the County's Hepatitis A [webpage](#) or <https://tinyurl.com/n8z6mf3>. On September 1, 2017, a countywide local health emergency was declared to further raise awareness of the outbreak and allow the County to potentially ask for mutual aid if necessary.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It can cause liver disease, which may last a few weeks and sometimes progress to a serious illness lasting months. In some cases, people can die, but in most cases the infection is self-limiting

How Is It Spread?

The hepatitis A virus is spread primarily by the fecal-oral route. This is when an uninfected person ingests food or water that has been contaminated with even a tiny or microscopic amount of the feces from an infected person. This can occur when:

- Touching objects or eating food that someone with hepatitis A virus infection handled, or
- Having sex with someone who has a hepatitis A virus infection (not limited to anal-oral contact).

What Are the Symptoms?

Hepatitis A virus does not always cause symptoms. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children and can develop symptoms 15 to 50 days after being infected.

Symptoms include fever, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, yellowing of the eyes (jaundice), stomach pain, vomiting, dark urine, pale stools, and diarrhea. Hepatitis A virus can cause liver failure and even death – this is



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rare and is more likely to occur in persons 50 or older and individuals with other forms of liver disease (Hepatitis B or C).

Hepatitis A virus can be spread up to two weeks before and one week after noticing symptoms. It can also be spread by individuals who are infected, but do not have symptoms.

How Can Hepatitis A Virus Be Prevented?

- **The best way to prevent hepatitis A is with the safe and effective hepatitis A vaccine.** Get two shots of the hepatitis A virus vaccine, six months apart.
 - Also, the vaccine may be given as a twin vaccine against both Hepatitis A and B, which is given as three shots over six months.
- Don't have sex with someone who has hepatitis A virus infection.
- Use your own towels, toothbrushes, and eating utensils.
- Don't share food, drinks, or smokes with other people.
- Wash hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing food.

Who Should Be Vaccinated?

- The following categories of people are routinely recommended to get the Hepatitis A vaccine by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices:
 - Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs
 - People with chronic liver conditions, such as cirrhosis, chronic hepatitis C, & chronic hepatitis B
 - Men who have sex with men
 - Travelers to countries with high or medium rates of hepatitis A virus
 - Persons with clotting factor disorders
 - Any person who wishes to be immune to hepatitis A
- The San Diego County Public Health Officer recommends the following categories of people get the vaccine because of this outbreak:
 - Homeless and housing unstable individuals
 - Individuals with ongoing, close contact with homeless and illicit drug using individuals in San Diego County, including health care, public safety and sanitation workers, and those who work in homeless shelters and service agencies.
 - Food handlers in San Diego County

What Does "Recommend" Mean?

- A vaccine is recommended to prevent getting and spreading serious diseases that could result in poor health, missed work, medical bills, and not being able to care for family. Because of the hepatitis A outbreak in San Diego, the risk to the general public is higher than normal, and the potential consequences of a food handler becoming ill, since hepatitis A can be transmitted by contaminated food, warrants this recommendation. It is also recommended that **any person** who wishes to obtain immunity to hepatitis A get the vaccine.



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Where Can I Get Vaccinated?

- Call your medical provider or 2-1-1 to find a community clinic or public health center near you to request the hepatitis A virus vaccine.

Is the Hepatitis A Vaccine Safe and Effective?

- Yes, the vaccine is safe and highly effective in preventing hepatitis A virus infection. You will be protected approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the first injection and longer-term defense is gained with the second injection. If you do not remember whether you were vaccinated, repeating the vaccination series is not harmful.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), before the Hepatitis A vaccine became available in 1995, more than 25,000 people developed Hepatitis A each year in the U.S. In 2014, there were about 2,500 cases reported. In 1999, routine vaccination was recommended by the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices for children in high-incidence states including California and in 2006, routine vaccination was recommended in all states.

Who Is at Increased Risk for Getting Hepatitis A Virus Infection?

- Travelers to countries with high or medium rates of hepatitis A virus.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs.
- Persons with clotting factor disorders.
- During this outbreak, individuals with ongoing, close contact with homeless and illicit drug using individuals in San Diego County may also be at increased risk.

Who Is at Increased Risk of Serious Illness from Hepatitis A Virus Infection?

- Individuals with chronic liver disease (i.e., cirrhosis and hepatitis C) are at increased risk of having poor outcomes, including death, if they are infected with hepatitis A virus. Individuals with other medical conditions may also be at increased risk of poor outcomes as well.

I Routinely Work with Homeless and/or Illicit Drug Using Individuals. What Precautions Should I Take?

- Most employees have a low risk of contracting Hepatitis A, if they comply with hand-washing and other hygiene requirements associated with their jobs.
- The best way to protect yourself is to continue to always use standard precautions AND get vaccinated.
- Under usual (non-outbreak) circumstances, occupational exposure does not warrant a routine recommendation to provide hepatitis A virus vaccination. However, given the current outbreak, the County Public Health Officer recommends hepatitis A virus vaccination for individuals with ongoing, close contact with homeless and illicit drug using individuals in San Diego County. This includes persons working in health care, public safety, sanitation, homeless shelters, and homeless and behavioral service



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provider agencies. The County Public Health Officer also recommends hepatitis A virus vaccination for all food handlers in San Diego County to reduce the potential risk of an ill food handler transmitting hepatitis A virus to others.

I Routinely Work with Homeless and/or Illicit Drug Using Individuals and Am a Health Care Worker. What Precautions Should I Take?

- Staff in healthcare environments would be expected to be protected by utilizing standard precautions; however due to the ongoing outbreak it is also recommended that staff receive hepatitis A virus vaccination for long-term protection.
- Please discuss with your primary care provider and/or occupational health if you are unsure.

What Can Local Businesses Do to Prevent the Further Spread of Hepatitis A?

- Remind employees of the importance of hand-washing with soap and warm water after using the bathroom, and before preparing, serving, or eating food.
- Maintain routine and consistent cleaning of bathrooms for employees and the public, using a chlorine-based disinfectant (bleach) with a ratio of 1 and 2/3 cup of bleach to one gallon of water. Due to the high bleach concentration of this mix, rinse surfaces with water after 1 minute of contact time and wear gloves while cleaning.
- For employees in physical contact with others, especially those at risk for Hepatitis A, wear disposable gloves and wash hands after each encounter.
- Coordinate with your occupational health provider to determine if Hepatitis A vaccine should be offered to employees. Due to the ongoing outbreak, it is recommended that staff who handle food are vaccinated.

Can Those Who Are Recommended to Be Vaccinated Get Vaccinations Free of Charge?

- There are many vaccines routinely recommended to adults and the hepatitis A vaccination recommendation is similar to all other vaccinations recommended by public health authorities (i.e., annual influenza vaccine). Individuals should always check with their personal or occupational health provider first when seeking a vaccination (influenza, pneumococcal, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, etc). Most providers have a mechanism for their patients to obtain vaccinations, which often includes getting a vaccination from a local pharmacy. Medi-Cal covers this vaccine with no prior authorization. Individuals who are uninsured or whose insurance does not cover routine vaccination can go to a public health center to obtain the vaccine at no cost.

Is a Prescription Needed if an Employee Goes to a Nearby Pharmacy?

- No.



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Is There Enough Vaccination for All Recommended Groups in the Entire County?

- There are no shortages of this vaccine locally or nationally.

Can Businesses that Have Employees Who Are Recommended to Be Vaccinated Require their Employees to Get Vaccinated or Show Proof of Vaccination?

- Businesses should consult with their human resources department about requiring a vaccine for employment.

Will an Employee's Insurance Cover Costs of Vaccination (Outside Of Required Co-Pay) Now That This Is "Recommended"?

- Yes.

Are Two Shots Of Vaccination Required (Or Just One)?

- The recommended series is two shots. There is no requirement for vaccination.

Why Declare A Local Health Emergency?

- A Local Health Emergency is declared to raise awareness of the hepatitis A outbreak. It also would allow the County to potentially ask for mutual aid if necessary.

What Area Is Covered By The Local Health Emergency?

- The entire County of San Diego is covered by the Local Health Emergency.

What Vaccination Efforts Are Underway?

- The County, in collaboration with our community health, homeless and behavioral health partners, have given approximately 19,000 vaccinations in response to the outbreak. More than 7,300 vaccinations have been given to the at-risk population, which includes the homeless population and illicit drug users.

Where Have Hand-Washing Stations Been Placed?

- The County has placed 40 portable handwashing stations in the City of San Diego in areas where there is a concentration of homeless people. The stations were placed by a vendor who will be servicing the stations every day. The usage of stations is monitored and those with heavier usage will be serviced twice a day.



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What Is Being Done to Sanitize the Streets?

- Under the Local Health Emergency, steps need to be taken to sanitize areas where significant numbers of homeless persons are living in the City of San Diego and other jurisdictions with significant numbers of homeless individuals. Sanitation may help decrease hepatitis A virus in the environment which may lower likelihood of the virus spreading.

Who Will Be Sanitizing the Streets?

- The street sanitization will be done by the City of San Diego and other jurisdictions with significant numbers of homeless individuals.

What other Sanitation Efforts Are Happening?

- Public Health Services has assembled and distributed over 2,400 hygiene kits containing water, non-alcohol hand sanitizer, cleaning wipes, clinic information and plastic bags to homeless people.

Our Organization Would Like a Presentation about Hepatitis A. Who Should We Contact?

- To request a County staff to come to your organization to give a Hepatitis A presentation, please contact the Epidemiology Program at 619-692-8499 or send an email to Epi.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov.

What If I Need Additional Assistance?

If additional assistance is needed, please contact your healthcare provider, occupational health provider, or call the following:

- California AIDS, STD and Hepatitis Hotline—800-367-AIDS (2437) (24 hours/day, 7 days/week)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Information Hotline—800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) (24 hours/day, 7 days/week)