




EMS Information Bulletin 2019-05

DATE: July 8, 2019

SUBJECT: Hepatitis A Outbreak

TO: PA EMS Agencies
PA EMS Providers

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In May 2019 the Pennsylvania Department of Health declared an outbreak of hepatitis A in the commonwealth. Since that announcement, the department has received inquires from various first responder agencies and organizations about hepatitis A. The purpose of this bulletin is to share information related to hepatitis A with the first responder community.

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A is one of several types of viruses that can cause hepatitis or inflammation of the liver.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Most adults with hepatitis A have symptoms, including fatigue, poor appetite, stomach pain, nausea, jaundice, dark urine, and/or clay-colored stools, that usually resolve within two months of infection. However, most infected children less than 6 years of age do not have symptoms. Symptoms can appear 15-50 days after exposure but usually occur 28 days (4 weeks) after exposure. In the current outbreak in Pennsylvania, more than 75 percent of cases reported to the Department of Health have required hospitalization.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the stool and blood of people who are infected. Hepatitis A is spread when something that has been contaminated with feces of an infected person gets into the mouth of another person. This can occur with amounts of feces far too small to see and can happen through 1) person-to-person contact, including having sex, caring for someone who is ill,

or using drugs with an infected person, or 2) eating contaminated food or drink. People infected with hepatitis A can begin to spread illness beginning two weeks before they develop symptoms. Food items contaminated with hepatitis A virus can remain infectious for months depending on environmental conditions.

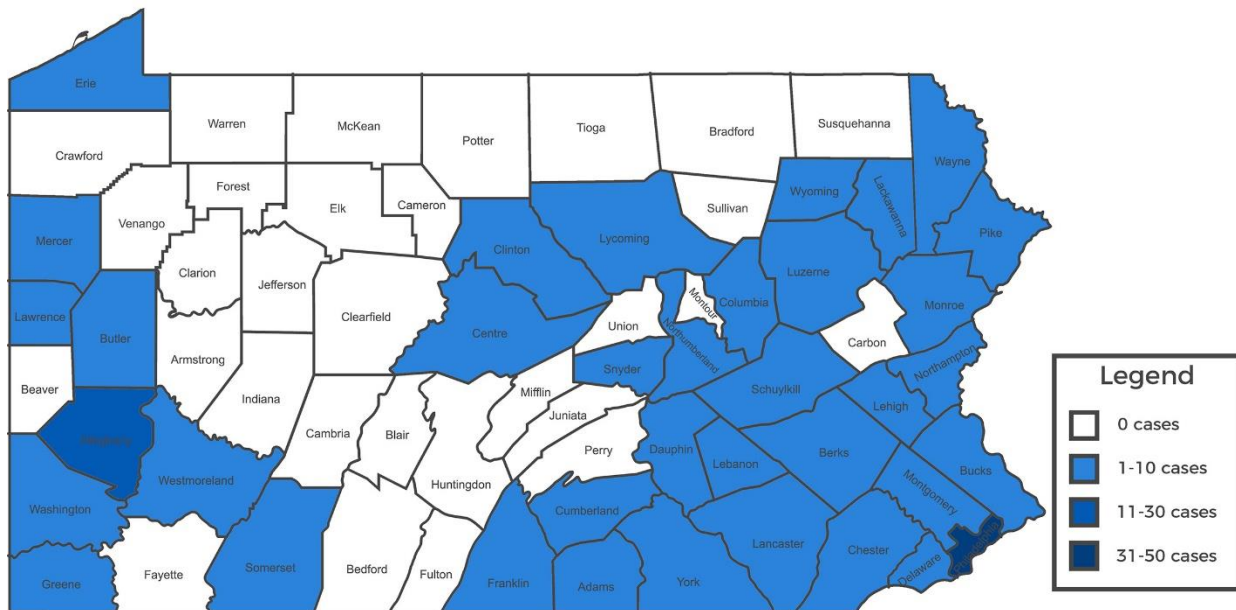
Who is most at risk for contracting hepatitis A?

1. People with direct contact with someone who has hepatitis A
2. Travelers to countries where hepatitis A is common
3. People who use illicit drugs, both injection and non-injection
4. People experiencing homelessness
5. Men who have sexual contact with other men

Is there information available on where cases have occurred to date?

The Department of Health maintains a web page related to the current hepatitis A outbreak including visual representations of case counts to date. A county break down of hepatitis A cases through May 11, 2019 is included below for your reference. As of this report at least one case of hepatitis A has been confirmed in 37 of Pennsylvania’s counties. Additional information related to the hepatitis A outbreak can be found by going here <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Hepatitis%20A/Pages/Hepatitis%20A.aspx>.

Map of Hepatitis A Counts by County



Protective Measures for First Responders

First responders of all disciplines through the course of their duties may engage and interact with individuals at risk for hepatitis A. Properly utilizing universal precautions such as wearing appropriate personal protective equipment for the situation (including gloves, eye protection, and masks) in addition to following good handwashing practices are some of the best measures to protect yourself from hepatitis A.

EMS providers and agencies should take this time to review their infection control policies and procedures, including the procedures providers should take in the event of a suspected occupational exposure.

In addition, there are effective vaccines for hepatitis A. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that “the best way to prevent hepatitis A infection is to get vaccinated”¹. The department encourages first responders of all disciplines to have a conversation with their health care provider to determine whether the hepatitis A vaccine is appropriate for you based on the benefits of vaccination and the potential occupational or personal risk factors you may have. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends hepatitis A vaccination for any person wishing to obtain immunity (protection) against hepatitis A. Additional information from the CDC, including information on the hepatitis A vaccine, can be located at <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HAV/index.htm>

Questions?

Many questions can be answered by referencing the Department of Health’s hepatitis A web page mentioned earlier in this bulletin. Additional questions from the first responder community can be addressed to the Bureau of Emergency Medical Services.

References:

- 1: U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Hepatitis A Information. (2017, September 29). Retrieved June 13, 2019, from <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>