

Hepatitis A Outbreaks

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the Hepatitis A virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. From 2000 to 2015, there were 1783 reported cases of Hepatitis A with 211 hospitalizations and four deaths. Most recently in 2016, a large outbreak occurred in nine states, including West Virginia and Maryland. This outbreak affected 143 people with 56 requiring admission to a hospital. The afflicted were infected by drinking smoothies made with contaminated imported frozen strawberries. Another outbreak occurred in Hawaii in June 2016 from contaminated scallops. This Hepatitis A outbreak affected 292 individuals with 74 requiring hospitalization.

Hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated by feces from an infected person. Hepatitis A can be spread when:

- An infected person does not wash his/her hands properly after going to the bathroom and then touches objects or food.
- A caregiver does not properly wash his or her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person.
- Someone engages in sexual activities with an infected person.

Hepatitis A can also be spread through contaminated food or water. Contamination of food can happen at any point: growing, harvesting, processing, handling and even after cooking.

Not everyone who contracts Hepatitis A has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after infection and can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Joint pain
- Jaundice

Most people who get Hepatitis A feel sick for several months, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. Sometimes Hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death.

The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated. Experts recommend the vaccine for all children and people with certain risk factors. The vaccine is also recommended for travelers. The vaccine is safe and effective and is given as two shots, 6 months apart. Both shots are needed for long term protection. The Hepatitis A vaccine is available at PharmaCare. For more information or to set up an appointment, call Lisa Bohrer, R.N.,BC at 301-689-2909. For more information about Hepatitis A outbreaks, visit www.cdc.gov.

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