

Hepatitis A Outbreak: Frequently Asked Questions

Why is an Emergency Proclamation needed?

An emergency proclamation allows the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to immediately purchase additional vaccines directly from manufacturers and manage vaccine distribution and supply so people most at risk are the first to get vaccinated. The proclamation also allows other medical staff, such as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), to administer vaccines.

Who is at risk?

This outbreak is mainly affecting people experiencing homelessness or using illicit drugs. Both of these groups should be vaccinated. People who have significant contact with these at-risk groups have also become ill, so people providing services to at-risk groups in affected areas should be vaccinated.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A infection is associated with poor sanitation and hygiene and is transmitted by the ingestion of contaminated food and drink and direct contact with an infectious person. In this outbreak, hepatitis A is spreading among people experiencing homelessness in areas where toilets and places to wash hands are very limited.

Hepatitis A is spread when:

- An infected person does not wash his/her hands properly after going to the bathroom and then touches other objects or food
- An uninfected person touches an object, eats food, or drinks water contaminated by an infected person, or comes in direct close contact with an infected person
- A person engages in sexual activities with an infected person

What can I do protect myself from hepatitis A?

Vaccination is the most effective tool to prevent the spread of hepatitis A. In addition to people experiencing homelessness and drug users, other groups who should be vaccinated include:

- People with chronic liver disease
- Men who have sex with men
- People traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common

There are also additional steps you can take anytime to protect yourself, including thoroughly washing your hands with soap and water before you eat and after using the bathroom. If you are concerned about your risk or you have other reasons to be vaccinated for hepatitis A, you should talk with your health care provider.

Who is already vaccinated?

Since 1999, the hepatitis A vaccine has been given to children as part of the routine childhood vaccine schedule. People vaccinated as children are protected from becoming infected and do not need to seek additional vaccination. People who served in the U.S. military since 1998 have also likely been vaccinated.

How do I know if I've been vaccinated?

If you don't have your immunization records, contact your health care provider or [check with the California Immunization Registry \(CAIR\)](#) by emailing CAIRHelpDesk@cdph.ca.gov or calling 800-578-7889.

What has the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) done to help stop the current outbreak?

CDPH has:

- issued statewide guidance to promote the use of hepatitis A vaccine for outbreak control
- provided staff support to local health departments to help manage the outbreak
- hosted regular calls with local health departments and CDC to share best practices and support disease control efforts
- closely monitored cases of hepatitis A to inform the statewide response and quickly identify disease spread
- administered nearly 80,000 doses of the hepatitis A vaccine for outbreak control in affected areas
- facilitated laboratory testing to determine whether new cases were linked to the outbreak
- compiled and disseminated disease control information to local health departments including:
 - Clinical guidance on hepatitis A prevention, diagnosis and other aspects of clinical care
 - Case and contact investigation guidance
 - Post-exposure prophylaxis guidance
 - Patient interview tools
 - Hepatitis A hygiene and sanitation guidance

How is CDPH prioritizing who gets a vaccine?

In order to control the outbreak and stop infections, it is necessary to first vaccinate people who are most likely to get infected. This will prevent people from becoming ill and passing the virus to others. Vaccines are prioritized in areas where hepatitis A is circulating, and for groups at highest risk of becoming infected.

During this outbreak, hepatitis A is mainly affecting people experiencing homelessness and some people using drugs. In the communities affected by the outbreak, both of these groups should be vaccinated. A small number of people who have significant contact with these at-risk groups have also become ill. Therefore, people providing services to at-risk groups in communities with ongoing hepatitis A transmission should also be vaccinated.

Am I at risk for getting hepatitis A?

Unlike the current outbreak, most other large outbreaks of hepatitis A occur when a food product is contaminated. Most people recover, and many never have any symptoms, however, adults are more likely to experience symptoms than children. People most at risk of severe infection are those with other health conditions, particularly chronic liver

disease. Since not everyone is at high risk in the current hepatitis A outbreak, the Governor's proclamation allows CDPH to manage vaccine distribution and supply so people most at risk are the first to get vaccinated.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is usually a mild illness, but it can be serious and sometimes fatal. Most people recover, and many never show symptoms.

If symptoms occur, they may include the following:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored bowel movements
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (a yellowing of the skin or eyes)

How do I know if my county has been affected? Where can I get more information?

CDPH posts weekly data on its [website](#) and people could also contact their [local health department](#).

How many cases of hepatitis A are usually reported in California?

In 2014, 2015, and 2016, there were 146, 181, and 231 reported cases in California, respectively.

How serious is this Hepatitis A outbreak?

This is a serious outbreak. It is the largest outbreak in the U.S. not related to a contaminated food product since the hepatitis A vaccine was introduced in 1996. CDPH is supporting efforts by local public health agencies to control this outbreak, which has also caused a significant number of hospitalizations and deaths. By vaccinating people at risk and improving sanitation services for people experiencing homelessness, the transmission of hepatitis A virus can be reduced.

Why are there so many deaths and hospitalizations? Is this a more virulent or deadly hepatitis A strain?

We do not believe the hepatitis A strain in this outbreak is more virulent. The affected population has more underlying conditions causing chronic liver disease, which can result in more severe disease when hepatitis A infection occurs.