

December 14, 2018

Dear Homeless and Substance Abuse Service Providers and Advocates:

RE: Sharp Increase in Confirmed Hepatitis A Infections Among High-Risk Populations

The Pima County Health Department is currently conducting an epidemiologic investigation of an outbreak of hepatitis A cases that are disproportionately affecting homeless and illicit drug-users in Pima County. We are asking for your help in stopping the spread of this highly contagious infectious disease in our community.

Seven acute hepatitis A virus (HAV) infections have been confirmed in Pima County residents with symptom onset between 11/15/2018 and 11/26/2018. Six of the seven (86%) cases have been hospitalized and there have been no associated deaths reported. The age range of confirmed HAV cases was from 21 to 62 years (median = 40 years).

Recommendations for Partners

How to help stop the spread of hepatitis A amongst the populations you serve:

- Recommend hepatitis A vaccination to all your clients. No cost vaccination is available within this community from providers listed below.
- Encourage clients to practice good hygiene:
 - Wash hands with soap and water after going to the bathroom and before eating or making food.
 - Avoid having sex with anyone who has hepatitis A.
 - Not share towels, toothbrushes, eating utensils, food, drinks, smokes or drug “works” with others.
- Immediately refer any client experiencing symptoms of hepatitis A to medical care. Symptoms include fever, vomiting, nausea, loss of appetite, stomach pain, yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, or gray colored stool.
- Immediately contact the Health Department if you refer a client to medical care.
- If providing meals, make sure food handlers always thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food and after using the bathroom.

Background

Hepatitis A is an infectious disease of the liver that is caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). It can be prevented with a safe, effective vaccine. Severity can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks, to a severe one persisting for several months. Although rare, hepatitis A can cause liver failure and even death – especially in persons with a weakened immune system. It is highly contagious and spreads when a person unknowingly ingests the virus from objects, food, or drinks contaminated by unperceivable amounts of stool from an infected person. Hepatitis A can also spread from close personal contact with an infected person such as through sex or caring for someone who is ill.

Symptoms of hepatitis A include yellow skin and eyes, fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, upset stomach, vomiting, stomach pain, dark urine and light-colored stools (poop). Symptoms develop between two to six weeks after an exposure, and people can spread the virus to others before symptoms appear.

Hepatitis A Vaccine Resources

There are places in Pima County where people can get the hepatitis A vaccine. Please advise clients to call ahead of time to ensure vaccine availability and to help them find the resource that is best for them:

- El Rio Health Clinics – (520) 670-8021 / www.elrio.org
- Marana Health Clinics – (520) 682-4111 / www.mhchealthcare.org
- St. Elizabeth’s’ Clinic – (520) 628-7871 / www.saintehec.com
- Pima County Health Department Clinics - (520) 724-7770 / www.pima.gov/health

Hepatitis A vaccination is also readily available from doctor’s offices and many retail pharmacies.

If you have questions about hepatitis A or this investigation, please do not hesitate to contact the Health Department Epidemiology Program at the phone number provided above. Our staff is ready and eager to support our partners as we work together to prevent the further spread of HAV infection within this highly vulnerable population. We thank you for your ongoing partnership and cooperation.

Sincerely,



Marcy Flanagan, DBA, MA
Department Director



Carlos M. Perez-Velez, MD
Deputy Chief Medical Officer