

Pima County Health Department

PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT

To: Health Care, Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Homeless and other Support Providers and Partners
Date: August 2, 2019
From: Epidemiology Program

Subject: Continued Hepatitis A Virus Outbreak in Pima County

Pima County is one of several Arizona counties currently experiencing an outbreak of hepatitis A virus (HAV) that is disproportionately affecting homeless people and individuals struggling with substance use and addiction. As of July 29, 2019:

- 227 confirmed cases of HAV
- 74% of cases have required hospitalization
- 26% of cases report experiencing homelessness
- 64% admit to drug use
- 3 outbreak associated deaths
- 65% are male
- 69% of cases are age 18-44
- 22% report homelessness AND drug use

Recommendations for Healthcare Providers

- Provide HAV vaccine to homeless individuals and illicit drug users who are not already immunized. The combined HAV/HBV (Twinrix®) vaccine may be used in this group if the individual is not already immune to HBV. Providers who do not have available vaccine may direct patients to an immunization clinic (listed below).
- Consider HAV infection in individuals, especially the homeless and those who use illicit drugs, with discrete onset of symptoms, and jaundice or elevated liver function tests.
- Since this outbreak involves homeless individuals, providers are urged to contact the Epidemiology Program, while suspected cases are still at the healthcare facility. This action will ensure that a disease investigator can interview the patient by phone for a risk history and/or facilitate specimen collection.
- Promptly report all confirmed and suspect HAV cases to the Epidemiology Program. Please fax a Communicable Disease Report Form, or call (520) 724-7797 24 hours a day.
- Encourage at-risk clients to vaccinate against hepatitis A. No cost vaccination is available within this community from providers listed below. Two vaccines, at least six months apart, provide immunity.
- Provide post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for close contacts of confirmed HAV cases. Susceptible people exposed to HAV should receive a dose of single-antigen HAV vaccine or intramuscular (IM) immune globulin (IG) (0.02 mL/kg), or both, as soon as possible within 2 weeks of last exposure.

Recommendations for Mental Health, Substance, Homeless and other Support Providers and Agencies

- 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 HAV.
 - Not share towels, toothbrushes, eating utensils, food, drinks, smokes or drug “works” with others.
- Immediately refer any client experiencing symptoms of HAV 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 your agency provides meals, make sure food handlers always thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food and after using the bathroom.
- Use cleaning supplies that specifically list effectiveness against HAV or norovirus.
- Allow Pima County Health Department access to your facility for a free vaccination clinic.

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.

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.

Resources

There are places in Pima County where people can get the HAV 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.