



**LAC DPH Health Alert:
Local Outbreak of Hepatitis A among
Persons Experiencing Homelessness
and/or who use Illicit Drugs**



May 10, 2024

*This message is intended for infectious disease, primary care, emergency medicine, urgent care, emergency medical services, and healthcare personnel who provide services to populations experiencing homelessness and/or using illicit drugs.
Please distribute as appropriate.*

Key Messages

- There is a hepatitis A outbreak in LA County among persons experiencing homelessness and/or who use illicit (injection and non-injection) drugs.
- Providers should suspect hepatitis A infection in patients presenting with jaundice or hepatitis symptoms and who either 1) report experiencing homelessness and/or using illicit drugs or 2) have close contact with these at-risk populations.
- Test for anti-HAV IgM in patients with suspected hepatitis A infection. Immediately report all patients with a positive anti-HAV IgM if they are experiencing homelessness and/or use illicit drugs by calling 213-240-7941. After hours call 213-974-1234. Non-outbreak related acute hepatitis A is reportable within 1 working day.
- Offer hepatitis A vaccine to persons experiencing homelessness and/or who use illicit drugs and to persons with frequent close contact with these at-risk populations. Vaccination and hand hygiene with soap and water offer the best prevention against HAV.

Current Situation

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH) has observed a sharp increase in hepatitis A virus (HAV) infections among persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) and persons who use illicit drugs (PWUD). Since mid-March 2024, LAC DPH has identified 5 cases of HAV in PEH/PWUD, compared with 4 cases in this population during the prior 6 months. At least 3 of these cases are genetically linked based on subgenomic sequencing of viral samples, suggesting a chain of transmission among PEH/PWUD in LA County. Sequencing results are still pending for one case; no specimen was available for fifth. LAC DPH suspects HAV is primarily being transmitted person-to-person through close contact, such as sharing drug use equipment or through ingestion of food/water with HAV contamination from inadequate environmental sanitation. Though no deaths have been reported during this outbreak at this time, the fatality rate of HAV in the PEH/PWUD is higher than the rate observed in healthy individuals.

Actions Requested of Providers

- **Suspect HAV** in PEH/PWUD or persons who have had close contact with PEH/PWUD presenting with symptoms of acute hepatitis. [Signs and symptoms of HAV](#) include abrupt onset of prodromal symptoms (nausea, anorexia, fever, malaise, or abdominal pain) and jaundice or elevated serum aminotransferase levels. (Note: Up to 30% of adults with acute hepatitis A will not develop jaundice.)
- **Order anti-HAV IgM in patients with suspected HAV.** Evaluate for alternative causes of acute hepatitis including other viral hepatitis. Please instruct the laboratory to hold any positive anti-HAV IgM and transport to LAC DPH Public Health Laboratory for additional testing. Do not test asymptomatic people for HAV infection as the false positive rate is high.
- **Immediately report all patients with a positive anti-HAV IgM who are PEH/PWUD or who have had close contact with PEH/PWUD to the LAC DPH by calling 213-240-7941.** After hours call 213-974-1234. Providers are requested to report PEH/PWUD with a positive anti-HAV IgM while they are still at the healthcare facility, which will facilitate immediate interview by a public health investigator to identify contacts who could benefit from post-exposure prophylaxis. *Please note that acute HAV in non-outbreak populations can be reported the next working day.*
- **Do not discharge patients to the street or shelters who are diagnosed with HAV until at least a week after the onset of jaundice.** If the patient does not have jaundice, the patient should not be discharged until 14 days after symptom onset. If the hospital or clinic case manager is unable to find a safe place for discharge of otherwise medically stable patients, please call LAC DPH for assistance: 213-240-7941 during business hours.
- **Provide post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for close contacts of confirmed HAV cases as directed by LAC DPH.** Susceptible people exposed to HAV should receive PEP within 2 weeks of last exposure and ideally as soon as possible. Single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine and immune globulin (IG) are effective for HAV PEP; recommendations for PEP vary with patient age and risk for severe infection and can be found on the CDPH [Hepatitis A Postexposure Prophylaxis Guidance Quicksheet](#). Vaccination with single antigen hepatitis A vaccine generally is recommended as part of the PEP regime to provide more long-lasting protection; [exceptions](#) include infants and in individuals who are allergic a previous dose of vaccine or to a component of the vaccine. DPH will assist in the management of contacts.
- **Offer hepatitis A vaccine to PEH, PWUD, and to persons who work in settings providing direct services to PEH/PWUD (e.g., shelters, needle exchange programs).** Serologic testing for HAV immunity is not recommended prior to vaccination. Hepatitis A vaccines are highly effective at preventing disease. More than 95% of adults will develop protective antibody within 4 weeks of a single dose of vaccine, and nearly 100% will seroconvert after receiving 2

doses. Vaccinate with either single antigen hepatitis A vaccine or the combined HAV/HBV (Twinrix) vaccine. See the Hepatitis A vaccine resources below for more information regarding vaccine coverage and availability.

Hepatitis A Vaccine Resources

LAC DPH Clinics: Hepatitis A vaccine is available at no cost at the LAC DPH [Public Health Centers](#) as well as participating community clinics for eligible people (e.g., PEH and PWUD) as well as people who are uninsured/underinsured. Refer to the Nurse Clinic information in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) for clinic times and locations.

In addition, LAC DPH is conducting outreach events to offer hepatitis A vaccine in conjunction with community partners that serve the homeless community.

Medi-Cal: Hepatitis A vaccine is covered for patients enrolled in both fee-for-service and managed care plans. Vaccine administration is covered if administered in a patient's established provider's office or by an in-network pharmacy. No prior authorization is required. Patients or those assisting them can call the plan's member services number listed on the back of their Medi-Cal Benefits Identification Card to obtain information on pharmacy services. Prior to referring a patient to an in-network pharmacy for HAV vaccination, please contact the pharmacy to verify vaccine availability.

AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP): Hepatitis vaccine is included on the ADAP formulary.

For questions regarding hepatitis A vaccine and/or supply related to this outbreak contact the LAC DPH Vaccine Preventable Disease Control Program at 213-351-7800.

Reporting

Immediately report positive anti-HAV IgM in patients associated with the current outbreak (PEH/PWUP and those who have had close contact with PEH/PWUD)

Los Angeles County DPH Acute Communicable Disease Control:

- Weekdays 8:30 am–5:00 pm: call 213-240-7941.
- After-hours: call 213-974-1234 and ask for the physician on call.

Long Beach Health and Human Services:

- Weekdays 8:00 am-5:00 pm: call 562-570-4302.
- After hours: call the duty officer at 562-500-5537.

Pasadena Public Health Department:

- Weekdays 8:00 am-5:00 pm: call 626-744-6089.
- After hours: call 626-744-6043.

Report acute HAV within 1 working day for patients NOT experiencing homelessness and/or using illicit drugs. See [Acute Communicable Disease Reporting](#).

Additional Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [Hepatitis A Vaccination: Information for Healthcare Providers](#)
- CDC [Hepatitis A Questions and Answers for Health Professionals](#)
- CDC [Hepatitis A General Fact Sheet](#) (for patients)
- California Department of Public Health (CDPH) [Hepatitis A Website](#)
- CDPH [Hepatitis A Public Health Investigation Guidance Quicksheet](#)
- LAC DPH [Clinical Recognition and Management of Hepatitis A: Preventing Outbreaks in Los Angeles County](#), *Rx for Prevention*, November 2019.

This Health Alert was sent by Dr. Sharon Balter, Chief, Acute Communicable Disease Control Program, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

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