

PREVENTING HEPATITIS A OUTBREAKS IN JAILS

Outbreaks of hepatitis A have been reported across the U.S., including here in Illinois and in many neighboring states. During these outbreaks, thousands of individuals have become ill and some have even died. In 2018, there was more than a seven-fold increase in annual hepatitis A (HAV) cases nationwide. Because some outbreaks of hepatitis A are occurring in jail settings, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) is encouraging you and your staff to take precautions to reduce the chance of a hepatitis A outbreak.

Who is at high risk in a jail setting?

Individuals in correctional and jail settings are at risk for becoming sick with hepatitis A due to the close living conditions, which allows the virus to spread easily. Additional at-risk groups include:

- People who use drugs, whether injected or not (cigarettes, joints, vaping products, pills, etc.)
- People who have experienced unstable housing or homelessness
- People who have sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A (engaging in oral-anal sex, also known as “rimming”)
- Men who have sex with men
- People who have close person-to-person contact with someone who has hepatitis A (those who share cells or bathroom facilities)
- People with chronic liver disease, including cirrhosis, hepatitis B, or hepatitis C

What is hepatitis A and how is it spread?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious disease that is spread from person to person and is found in the feces (poop) of people with hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A can be easily spread if someone does not wash his or her hands properly after using the bathroom. Hepatitis A is different from hepatitis B and hepatitis C. While all three can damage the liver, they are caused by different viruses and are spread in different ways. Most often, we see hepatitis A spread by eating or drinking food or water with the virus in it. In recent outbreaks, hepatitis A has been spread by sharing drugs or drug products, or having sexual contact with someone with hepatitis A.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms usually start four weeks after the individual was exposed to the hepatitis A virus. However, they can start as early as two, and as late as seven weeks after the virus enters the body. Symptoms can start quickly and can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Nausea
- Vomiting

- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine (pee)
- Diarrhea (loose stools)
- Clay-colored stools
- Joint pain
- Loss of appetite

What can you do to help prevent an outbreak?

- Vaccinate all inmates and correctional staff with hepatitis A vaccine. This is the most effective way to prevent an outbreak in your jail and community.
 - Implementing a vaccine program on intake is one approach to ensure everyone is vaccinated.
- Provide clean towels and soap to all inmates.
- Encourage regular handwashing before eating. **Alcohol-based hand gel does not kill the hepatitis A virus. Soap and water must be used.**
- Ensure kitchen staff are healthy and vaccinated. They can cause or further spread an outbreak if they work when they are ill.
- Inmates should not share food, drinks, utensils, cigarettes, vape pens, or personal hygiene items.
- Any ill inmate experiencing symptoms of hepatitis A should be sent for medical evaluation by a health care provider and reported to your local health department immediately.

Why should you take action?

Hepatitis A outbreaks in jail settings are extremely disruptive to the day-to-day operations of jails and correctional facilities. In addition, when a sick inmate is released, they re-enter the community and can spread hepatitis A to others. You are helping to protect the community, as well as your facility, from a hepatitis A outbreak.

What should you know about the hepatitis A vaccine?

The hepatitis A vaccine is a safe and an effective tool for preventing the spread of disease. It is important to use the single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine when vaccinating inmates and correctional staff. One dose of single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine has been shown to control outbreaks of hepatitis A. **It provides up to 95% protection against hepatitis A in healthy individuals for up to 11 years.**

Where to find more information on hepatitis A and vaccine resources:

- [Contact your local health department.](#)
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released a [health alert network](#) (HAN) message discussing the importance of prevention.
- The CDC provides regular web updates on the [status of ongoing outbreaks.](#)
- The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) [hepatitis A webpage](#) includes an update of Illinois's hepatitis A outbreak, information about the disease and vaccine, as well as educational resources.