

Frequently Asked Questions: Hepatitis A

West Virginia is experiencing an unprecedented multi-state hepatitis A outbreak. Below are answers to common questions. We will continue to update this document with questions received.

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General Questions

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Although rare, hepatitis A can cause death.

How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A usually spreads when a person unknowingly ingests the virus from objects, food, or drinks contaminated by small, undetected amounts of stool from an infected person. Hepatitis A can also spread from close personal contact with an infected person such as through sexual contact or caring for someone who is ill.

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Although anyone can get hepatitis A, certain groups of people are at higher risk such as:

- Persons who use injection and non-injection drug users
- Homeless persons
- Persons who had sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A
- Men who have sexual encounters with other men
- People who have come into close person-to-person contact with an infected person
- People with ongoing, close contact with people who are homeless or people who use injection and non-injection drugs

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

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| • Fever | • Vomiting | • Joint pain |
| • Fatigue | • Abdominal pain | • Jaundice |
| • Loss of appetite | • Dark urine | (yellowing of the skin/eye) |
| • Nausea | • Clay-colored stools | |

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to hepatitis A?

If you think you were exposed to hepatitis A, call or visit a health professional right away since hepatitis A can be easily spread 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms show.

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What should I do if I ate a restaurant where an employee was diagnosed with hepatitis A?

The risk of contracting hepatitis A from eating at a restaurant is extremely low, even during outbreak situations. When a food service worker diagnosed with hepatitis A, he or she is immediately excluded from work and not allowed to return without a release from his or her medical provider. Additionally, all employees at the establishment are vaccinated, and disinfection and sanitation practices are followed.

Can hepatitis A be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent hepatitis A is with the hepatitis A vaccine. Practicing good hand hygiene – including thoroughly washing hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food – plays an important role in preventing the spread of hepatitis A.

Who is at increased risk for hepatitis A infection?

- Persons with direct contact with persons who have hepatitis A
- Travelers to countries where hepatitis A infections are high and native to the country
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of injection and non-injection drugs
- Persons with clotting factor disorders
- Persons working with non-human primates
- Household members and other close personal contacts of adopted children newly arriving from countries where infections of hepatitis A is high and native to the country
- Anyone with ongoing, close contact with people who are homeless or people who use injection and non-injection drugs

This outbreak is mainly affecting people experiencing homelessness or using illicit drugs who are exposed to settings with limited hygiene. Both these groups in areas where hepatitis A is currently being transmitted 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 areas with active hepatitis A transmission should be vaccinated. At this time, there is no increased risk of hepatitis A in the general public.

Who should be vaccinated against hepatitis A?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that the following persons be vaccinated against hepatitis A:

- All children at age 1 year
- Persons who are at increased risk for infection
- Persons who are at increased risk for complications from hepatitis A
- Any person wishing to obtain immunity (protection)

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Where can I go to get vaccinated against hepatitis A?

If you have insurance you can see your health care provider or many local pharmacies (e.g. Rite Aid, CVS, Walmart, etc.) carry the vaccine. Local health departments have a limited supply of vaccine for those at highest risk for hepatitis A infection. Contact your local health department with questions: <https://dhhr.wv.gov/localhealth/Pages/Map.aspx>.

What else can I do protect myself from hepatitis A?

There are 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.

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, efforts are being made to target people most at risk first to get vaccinated.

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

The WV Department of Health & Human Resources posts weekly data at: www.HepAwareWV.org.

How many cases of hepatitis A are usually reported in West Virginia?

In 2014, 2015, and 2016, there were 12, 8, and 15 reported acute cases in West Virginia, 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. The West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources is supporting efforts with local public health agencies to control this outbreak, which has also caused a significant number of hospitalizations and deaths. By vaccinating people at risk, the transmission of hepatitis A virus can be reduced.

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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.

Where can I find more information on hepatitis A?

- <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>
- <https://HepAwareWV.org>

Health Care and Service Provider Questions

I work with a high-risk population for hepatitis and want to obtain vaccine for a vaccination clinic. Who should I contact?

Hepatitis A vaccine can be requested for outbreak purposes through the State Department of Health & Human Resources. To request vaccine to administer at your health care facility, complete a [Vaccine Request Form](#). For additional information, visit www.HepAwareWV.org

I am a first responder. How can I protect myself from infection?

Use simple precautions such as washing hands after having contact with another individual and before touching or consuming food and beverages. Wear gloves according to standard contact precautions. For responders who work with individuals at risk for hepatitis A infection, vaccination can provide additional protection.

I work in a hospital. Do I need to be vaccinated against hepatitis A?

Health care workers are not at increased risk for hepatitis A. If a patient with hepatitis A is admitted to the hospital, routine infection-control precautions will prevent transmission to hospital staff. For Health care workers who work in close and frequent personal contact with at risk patients in outbreak affected areas, vaccination can provide additional protection.

What are standard contraindications for hepatitis A vaccine?

Hepatitis A vaccine should not be administered to persons with a history of severe allergic reaction (e.g., anaphylaxis) after a previous dose or to a vaccine component. Vaccination of persons with moderate or severe acute illness with or without fever should be deferred until their condition improves.

Can hepatitis A vaccine be given to pregnant women?

Pregnant women are allowed to receive the hepatitis A vaccine. According to the CDC, the safety of hepatitis A vaccination during pregnancy has not been determined; however, because hepatitis A vaccine is produced from inactivated hepatitis A virus (HAV), the theoretic risk to the developing fetus is expected to be low. The risk associated with vaccination should be weighed against the risk for hepatitis A in pregnant women who might be at high risk for exposure to HAV.

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Can facilities implement standing order protocols to ensure clinical staff administer hepatitis A vaccine to screened individuals?

Yes. The vaccine is very safe. Many facilities use a standing order to vaccinate the population at risk. Vaccine should not be administered to anyone who has signs and symptoms of hepatitis A. Here's a [link](#) to a sample standing order.

State-Supplied Vaccine for Outbreak Response

Who is eligible to receive state-supplied adult hepatitis A vaccine?

Anyone aged 19 years and older in priority at risk groups listed below are eligible to receive free state-supplied hepatitis A vaccine.

- Persons who use injection or non-injection illicit drugs
- Men who have sex with men
- Persons who are homeless or in transient living situations
- Persons who have been incarcerated
- Persons with acute or chronic liver disease, including those with hepatitis B virus and/or hepatitis C virus
- Persons with ongoing exposure to a group listed above

Can any at risk individual be given the state-supplied hepatitis A vaccine, even if they have health insurance?

State-supplied adult hepatitis A vaccine for priority groups previously listed can be used for insured patients. You cannot charge for the cost of vaccine if state-supplied.

We highly encourage use of private supply vaccine when feasible and to bill insurance, but we do not want to create a barrier for individuals getting vaccinated. If the insurance status of an at risk patient is undetermined, we recommend using public vaccine to ensure that at risk patients are vaccinated.

Can the state-supplied hepatitis A vaccine be used for kids and teens that fall into the outbreak priority groups?

The state-supplied vaccine for outbreak response is an adult dose of vaccine and not meant for individuals under 18 years of age.

If your health care facility receives adult hepatitis A vaccine, but is not a VFC provider, and encounters a VFC eligible child or teen (under 18 years of age) at risk or has close personal contact with individuals at risk for hepatitis A, the facility can refer the child to a primary care provider or local health department for vaccination.

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For kids and teens who meet the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program eligibility criteria, state-supplied childhood doses are available through VFC program providers. A child is eligible for the VFC program if he or she is younger than 19 years of age and is one of the following: Medicaid-eligible, Uninsured, Underinsured, American Indian or Alaska Native.

All West Virginia health departments participate in the VFC program. Find a health department near you by clicking [here](#). If you need more information about the VFC program call the Division of Immunization Services at 1-800-642-3634.

Can employees of our facilities who are at risk (i.e., included in a priority group) get the state provided hepatitis A vaccine? Yes.

Is free vaccine only available for the first dose?

Yes. The vaccine initiative only covers the first dose of single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine. Given limited vaccine supply, the state is offering vaccine to administer one dose to protect individuals at highest risk against the outbreak. One dose of single antigen hepatitis A vaccine is 90-95% effective. For more information on how to request hepatitis A vaccine, visit www.HepAwareWV.org.

How can health care providers get access to the West Virginia State Immunization Information System (WVSIIIS)? Is there a limit on the number of users per facility?

Health care providers can gain access to the WVSIIIS to view and/or enter immunization records. To request access, complete and submit the [new user enrollment form](#) according to the directions on the form. For a given organization/facility, there is no limit on the number of users.

WVSIIIS is a confidential, computerized information system that keeps complete and up-to-date shot records.

How quickly is vaccine administration data available in the West Virginia Statewide Immunization Information System (WVSIIIS)?

- If vaccine administration data is entered in the WVSIIIS directly, the data entered is immediately available.
- If your facility shares vaccine administration data from your electronic medical record system to the state through an interface or data file upload, vaccine administration data is available in the WVSIIIS when the upload occurs. The frequency of this upload may vary by facility.
- If your facility provides paper log records to the state for data entry into the WVSIIIS, vaccine administration data will be available once the record is entered. Due to the volume of logs received, we are experiencing some delays with data entry of paper logs.

If I already have access to WVSIIIS (e.g., VFC provider), do I use the same user ID and password to log into the WVSIIIS to enter hepatitis A administration data? Yes.

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What is the duration of the vaccine initiative? How long will facilities be able to order free hepatitis A vaccine for administration to at risk groups?

The length of time for ordering free adult hepatitis A vaccine has not been determined. We will continue to provide vaccine to help control the outbreak. Weekly updates for hepatitis A case counts by county can be found at www.HepAware.org.

When adult hepatitis A vaccine is ordered, what is the average delivery turn-around-time?

Most emergency orders placed Monday to Thursday will ship out same day if processed before 3 pm and will be delivered within 24-48 hours. Orders placed on Friday (or late Thursday after order cut-off) will ship on Monday. Please note, for the holidays, no orders can be shipped during November 19 to 23, and December 24 to January 1.

How is the West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources 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.