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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

To: Medical Providers, Clinicians, Hospitalists, Health Care Facilities, Physician Practices, Corrections and Veteran Agencies, School Health Care, Emergency Services,
From: Dr. Siiri Bennett, State Epidemiologist
Subject: **Hepatitis A Increase in Maine**
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HEPATITIS A INCREASE IN THREE MAINE COUNTIES

Maine has seen an increase in hepatitis A cases in Penobscot, Somerset, and York counties over the past four months, with the number of reported cases climbing from zero in January and February to 13 in Penobscot, 7 in Somerset, and 6 in York counties in March through today. Twenty-one of the 26 cases had risk factors of injection drug use or housing insecurity.

Historically Maine had 7 to 10 cases of hepatitis A per year over the past decade. In 2019, Maine CDC identified 45 cases. This increase was driven by a restaurant-associated outbreak and cases related to injection drug use or homelessness. Since January 1, 2020, Maine CDC has identified 39 cases of hepatitis A. Recent case investigations, however, have not identified a source of the infections. The increase of hepatitis A in Maine mirrors an increase of cases seen across the country.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A infection is a vaccine-preventable illness. The primary means of hepatitis A virus (HAV) transmission in the United States is typically person-to-person through the fecal-oral route (*i.e.*, ingestion of something that has been contaminated with the feces of an infected person). Symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice. Illness from hepatitis A is typically acute and self-limited; however, when this disease affects populations with already poor health (*e.g.*, people who have hepatitis B and C infections or chronic liver disease), infection can lead to serious outcomes, including death.

Background

Thirty-three states across the country have reported outbreaks of hepatitis A, primarily among people who use drugs and people experiencing homelessness. Since the hepatitis A outbreaks were first identified in 2016, nationally more than 32,650 cases, 19,950 hospitalizations, and 325 deaths as a result of hepatitis A virus

infection have been reported. There are currently hepatitis A outbreaks in New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts.

Recommendations

Maine CDC recommends that healthcare providers and facilities that provide services to at-risk populations vaccinate their clients to prevent further spread of hepatitis A. Providers should:

- Screen patients for risk factors (*e.g.*, drug use, homelessness, incarceration, men who have sex with men (MSM), and chronic liver disease).
- Recommend and administer hepatitis A vaccine to at-risk patients, regardless of the original presenting complaint or the type of clinical facility. In particular, the emergency department may be an individual's only interaction with the healthcare system and is an important opportunity for prevention.
- Record immunizations in the state immunization information system (Immpact).
- Consider hepatitis A as a diagnosis in anyone with jaundice, elevated liver enzymes, or clinically compatible symptoms. Order an acute hepatitis panel that includes hepatitis A IgM on these patients.
- Rapidly report all persons diagnosed with hepatitis A to Maine CDC to ensure timely case investigation and follow-up of contacts.

Maine CDC recommends that the following facilities that serve at-risk populations vaccinate their clients to prevent further spread of hepatitis A:

- Emergency departments
- Federally Qualified Health Clinics (FQHC)
- Urgent, Express, or quick care clinics
- Correctional facilities, including state prisons and county jails
- Shelters and resource centers for people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity
- Syringe Service Programs
- Medication-Assisted Treatment providers (MAT)
- Substance use disorder treatment facilities and recovery centers
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STD) clinics

Prevention

The best way to prevent HAV infection is through vaccination with the hepatitis A vaccine. One dose of single-antigen hepatitis A vaccine has been shown to control outbreaks of hepatitis A and provides up to 95% protection in healthy individuals for up to 11 years. Pre-vaccination serologic testing is not required to administer hepatitis A vaccine. Vaccinations should not be postponed if vaccination history cannot be obtained or records are unavailable. If you need vaccine to vaccinate uninsured individuals, please contact the Maine Immunization Program (MIP) at 207-287-3746 or 800-867-4775 or ImmunizME@dhhs.maine.gov.

Additionally, 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.

Risk factors for infection

The following individuals are at highest risk for hepatitis A:

- People who use drugs (injection or non-injection)
- People experiencing homelessness
- Men who have sex with men (MSM)
- People who are, or were recently, incarcerated
- People with chronic liver disease, including cirrhosis, hepatitis B, or hepatitis C

Reporting: Hepatitis A, B, C, D and E are reportable conditions in the State of Maine. Health care providers should report all cases of acute hepatitis to Maine CDC at 1-800-821-5821 immediately on recognition or strong suspicion of disease. Cases of chronic hepatitis B, C and D (conventional and rapid tests) should be reported within 48 hours of recognition or strong suspicion of disease.

For More Information

- Maine CDC hepatitis website www.maine.gov/dhhs/hepatitis
- MMWR. Hepatitis A Virus Outbreaks Associated with Drug Use and Homelessness – California, Kentucky, Michigan, and Utah, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6743a3.htm>
- CDC’s Hepatitis A Outbreak website. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/outbreaks/2017March-HepatitisA.htm>
- Outbreak specific considerations for hepatitis A vaccine administration. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/outbreaks/InterimOutbreakGuidance-HAV-VaccineAdmin.htm>
- CDC’s Hepatitis A Virus website. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>
- Hepatitis A General Information Fact Sheet. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/pdfs/hepageneralfactsheet.pdf>
- CDC’s The Pink Book. Chapter 9: Hepatitis A. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/downloads/hepa.pdf>