



2019 Advisory # 5

Administer Hepatitis A Vaccine to All Persons Experiencing Homelessness or Using Drugs

Please Share this Alert with All Emergency Medicine, Family Medicine, Primary Care, HIV Specialists, Infectious Disease, Internal Medicine Staff, and any other provider caring for homeless individuals or people who use drugs in your facility

- **Since December 2018, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has investigated three cases of hepatitis A among individuals who were experiencing homelessness or using drugs.**
- **There are widespread and ongoing outbreaks in several states of hepatitis A among persons experiencing homelessness or using drugs.**
- **Hepatitis A is a vaccine-preventable disease that may have severe complications in adults.**
- **All persons experiencing homelessness or using drugs should receive hepatitis A vaccine in accordance with the recently updated national guidelines.**
- **Immediately report suspect cases of hepatitis A infection by phone while the patient is still at the clinical facility if the patient is experiencing homelessness or uses drugs.**

March 25, 2019

The New York City (NYC) Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) has identified three cases of hepatitis A virus (HAV) infection since December 2018 in individuals who were experiencing homelessness or who were using drugs. The population of people experiencing homelessness includes anyone living on the street, in a shelter, or otherwise without a permanent address.

Since 2017, there have been multiple large-scale hepatitis A outbreaks across the United States (<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/outbreaks/2017March-HepatitisA.htm>) among persons experiencing homelessness or using drugs, including in California, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia (<https://emergency.cdc.gov/han/han00412.asp>). These outbreaks are unprecedented in size and severity. Given these HAV outbreaks in other states involving similar populations, there is concern that an increase in cases among persons experiencing homelessness or using drugs may occur in NYC. Although an outbreak is not currently occurring in NYC, DOHMH and the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) are working together to ensure that these New Yorkers are safe, by increasing efforts to offer preventive hepatitis A vaccinations to avoid a similar occurrence in our city.

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by HAV, ranging in severity from mild infection lasting a few weeks to severe disease lasting several months. While most patients will fully recover, hospitalizations for cases in the recent nationwide HAV outbreaks among people

who are homeless or use drugs have ranged from 25%–82%, and case mortality in these outbreaks has been 3%. This is likely related to the higher than average prevalence of comorbidities including other liver diseases in many persons experiencing homelessness. HAV is transmitted person-to-person through the fecal-oral route or through contact with a fecal-contaminated environment. Among those who are experiencing homelessness who live on the streets, hepatitis A can be spread more easily due to lack of access to proper handwashing facilities and clean toilet facilities. Hepatitis A can also be spread through ingestion of contaminated food or water, which most often occurs in countries where hepatitis A is common.

While in NYC, the vast majority of homeless persons live in transitional housing, some do still experience street homelessness. DOHMH and DHS are sufficiently concerned by the outbreaks in other jurisdictions to remind medical providers to vaccinate **ALL** persons experiencing homelessness and/or using drugs in NYC. This recommendation is supported by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. ([ACIP 2019](#)).

For more information and other indications for hepatitis A vaccine go to:

NYC DOHMH: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/hepatitis-a.page>

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/hcp/imz/adult.html>

Concern about loss to follow-up before hepatitis A vaccine series completion should not be a deterrent to initiating the vaccine series in persons experiencing homelessness. Although recommended as a 2-dose series, one dose of hepatitis A vaccine provides personal protection and can contribute to herd immunity. Seroconversion after the first dose is estimated at greater than 95%, and available evidence demonstrates protection for up to 11 years from 1 dose of vaccine.

Providers should increase efforts to offer hepatitis A vaccine to all persons experiencing homelessness or using drugs who have not been vaccinated previously or do not know their vaccination status. Emergency departments, acute care and urgent care settings, as well as other clinical sites that frequently interact with persons who are homeless or use drugs, offer great opportunities for reaching this population. The DOHMH strongly recommends that health care facilities that serve persons experiencing homelessness implement protocols, including non-patient specific (standing) orders, to routinely offer hepatitis A vaccine.

Providers can check the NYC Citywide Immunization Registry (CIR) for their patients' vaccination status (visit nyc.gov/health/cir to register for the CIR). **Serologic testing is not indicated to evaluate exposure history or immunity prior to administering vaccine; if you want to check your patients' prior immunity (due to infection or previous vaccination), draw blood, but do not delay administration of the first dose of hepatitis A vaccine.** An extra dose of vaccine is safe to administer even if the patient has had previous infection or vaccine-induced immunity. Some health insurance plans will pay a vaccine acquisition cost and administration fee (such as Medicaid). Check with the patient's insurance to confirm coverage. Providers can purchase vaccine from the manufacturer or from their usual distributor. If you do not stock hepatitis A vaccine or do not have a strategy to acquire vaccine for your patients, please refer your patients to a facility that does or call 311.

Please immediately report laboratory-confirmed cases of hepatitis A infection that occur among people experiencing homelessness or using drugs to the Health Department by telephone. To report a case and for information about hepatitis A or hepatitis A vaccine, please call 866-NYC-DOH1 (1-866-692-3641). You may also report via NYC MED at nyc.gov/nycmed. Contacts of people with cases of hepatitis A should be notified of exposure and offered vaccination for hepatitis A if unvaccinated. The NYC Health Department can assist with notification and prophylaxis if notified promptly.

We greatly appreciate your assistance.

Sincerely,



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