

News Release

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Hepatitis A vaccine available for those traveling to outbreak areas

Outbreaks of hepatitis A in the neighboring states of Michigan, Kentucky and Indiana have prompted several calls to the Knox County Health Department regarding the availability of hepatitis A vaccine.

Lorraine Bratton, RN, communicable disease nurse for the health department, said the hepatitis A vaccine is available at the health department and is highly recommended for those who have never been vaccinated and/or are traveling to the outbreak-affected states. She said the vaccine is administered in a two dose series and cost for the vaccine is covered by most health insurance. For those without insurance, she said payment assistance is available.

Hepatitis A is a vaccine-preventable liver disease that usually spreads when a person ingests fecal matter—even in microscopic amounts—from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated by the stool of an infected person. Hepatitis A also can spread from close personal contact with an infected person, such as through sex.

Symptoms of hepatitis A include fatigue, low appetite, stomach pain, nausea, clay-colored stools and jaundice..

People at increased risk for hepatitis A include those with direct contact with individuals infected with the virus; travelers to areas where the virus is prevalent; men who have sex with men; people who use street drugs whether they are injected or not; people with blood clotting factor disorders; people with chronic liver disease; and household members and other close contacts of adopted children newly arrived from countries where hepatitis A is common.

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In addition to vaccination, hepatitis A is also prevented through the common public health practice of hand-washing, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Hepatitis A is highly contagious and it is very important that food service workers and healthcare workers are vaccinated.

One key difference between hepatitis A and its viral cousins hepatitis B and hepatitis C, is that it's usually short-term and doesn't become a long-lasting chronic condition. However, it can take weeks or months for those infected to recover from the illness, according to the World Health Organization. For those with chronic conditions, hepatitis can be serious and even fatal. In the states reporting recent outbreaks, there have been several deaths.

The current hepatitis A outbreaks are among several reported in the United States during the past year. So far in 2018, there have been 47 cases of hepatitis A in Ohio compared to five cases during the same timeframe last year. Health officials have not identified a specific cause for the outbreaks, but speculate that a lack of stricter vaccination requirements decades ago means that some older residents may have never received the hepatitis A vaccine. After a decrease in hepatitis infections for more than a decade, the CDC indicates that the number of cases began increasing about five years ago.

Nowadays, the hepatitis A vaccine is offered to all children beginning at 12 months of age with the second dose given 6 months later. A person who has not received the vaccine can fight off the disease by being immunized up to two weeks after being exposed to the virus because its incubation period is usually 14 to 28 days.

For more information on hepatitis A, contact Bratton at 740-399-8003. To make an appointment to get the hepatitis A vaccine, call 740-399-8008.

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