

HEPATITIS A IN GAY MEN

The Clark County Health District recently received four reports of acute hepatitis A infections in men who have sex with men (MSM). Within the last month, Washoe District Health Department also reported two cases of hepatitis A among MSM. None of the men had a history of travel to endemic areas or consumption of high-risk foods.

The clinical case definition of hepatitis A is an acute illness with a) a discreet onset of symptoms and b) jaundice or elevated serum aminotransferase levels. Hepatitis A (HAV) can not be differentiated from other types of viral hepatitis on the basis of clinical or epidemiological features alone. Serologic testing to detect anti-HAV Immunoglobulin M (IgM) is required to confirm a diagnosis of acute HAV infection.

The average incubation period of hepatitis A is 28 days (range 15-50 days). Symptoms of HAV infections typically have an abrupt onset and may include fever, malaise, anorexia, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, and jaundice. The likelihood of experiencing symptoms with HAV infections is related to the person's age. Seventy percent of infections in children under six years of age are asymptomatic. In contrast, HAV infections among older children and adults are usually symptomatic, with over 70% accompanied by jaundice.

HAV is transmitted primarily by the fecal-oral route by either person-to-person contact or ingestion of contaminated food or water. On rare occasions, HAV infection has been transmitted by transfusion of blood or blood products collected from donors during the viremic phase of their infection. Although homosexual men are at intermediate risk for hepatitis A infection, outbreaks among MSM have been frequently reported. Studies (described in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report) indicate that among this group, anti-HAV-positive persons

reported more oral-anal contact, longer duration of homosexual activity, and a larger number of sexual partners than people with no serologic evidence of HAV infection. Regardless of sexual orientation, any type of anal sexual activity is a risk factor for hepatitis A infection.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommendations for use of hepatitis A vaccine includes routine pre-exposure immunizations of the following:

- Persons traveling to or working in countries that have high or intermediate endemicity of infection
- Men who have sex with men
- Injecting drug users
- Persons who have occupational risk for infection (e.g. laboratory researchers)
- Persons who have clotting-factor disorders
- Persons with chronic liver diseases such as chronic hepatitis B or hepatitis C because these individuals are at risk of serious complications if co-infected with hepatitis A

Hepatitis A vaccine is available at the Clark County Health District's Immunization Clinic, Monday through Friday, 8 am to 4:30 pm. The vaccine is a two-dose series given 6 to 12 months apart. The cost is \$30 per dose for adults, and \$15 per dose for children ages 6 to 18. There is no charge for children under 6 years old. For more information about hepatitis A, please call (702) 383-1378.

Resources:

- CDC. Case Definitions for Infectious Conditions Under Public Health Surveillance. MMWR 1997;4(No. RR-10).*
- CDC. Prevention of Hepatitis A Through Active or Passive Immunization: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). MMWR 1999;48(No. RR).*

