

Hepatitis A in the Tampa Bay Area - Facts & Resources

St. Petersburg, FL
October 9, 2019

Florida Food Safety Systems has seen an increase in calls for information about Hepatitis A due to recent stories in the media. As a service to the local community, we are providing this Hepatitis A Fact Sheet to help educate the public about the signs, symptoms, and methods of transmission and how to contact your local Department of Health for more information.

The Hepatitis A outbreak in Florida doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon. In August 2019, a public health emergency was issued for the state of Florida.

According to the Florida Department of Health, from January 2019 through August 3, 2019, 2,413 hepatitis A cases have been reported.

Cases of Hepatitis A in the state of Florida have more than doubled since 2016-2017.

So, what exactly *is* Hepatitis A?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines Hepatitis A as a vaccine-preventable, communicable disease of the liver caused by the Hepatitis A virus (HAV).

Hepatitis A is most commonly transmitted person-to-person via fecal-oral route or through consumption of contaminated food or water.

Hepatitis A is the only Hepatitis virus that is acute, meaning the disease is self-limiting and symptoms will subside after a couple of months, typically with no lifetime impact. Adult symptoms of Hepatitis A include:

- Stomach pain (usually below the ribs on the right side of the body)
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Clay-colored stool
- Dark urine
- Joint pain
- Anorexia
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes)

Most children under six years of age do not exhibit symptoms at all.

Antibodies produced in response to an infection last for life and protect against re-infection from the virus.

The Hepatitis A virus takes an average of 28 days to incubate in the host's body.

What are the risk factors for contracting Hepatitis A?

Anyone not vaccinated is at risk for Hepatitis A. Some factors increase the likelihood of contracting the virus, such as:

- People traveling to countries where Hepatitis A is common
- People using both injection and non-injection drugs
- Men having sexual contact with men
- People in direct contact with someone diagnosed as HAV positive
- Caregivers of those with HAV
- People working with non-human primates
- People with compromised immune systems

Let's take a deeper look into how Hepatitis A is spread.

According to the CDC, the virus is able to survive without a host for months. Hepatitis A is cold-tolerant, meaning freezing will not kill the virus. High temperatures (185°F or higher for at least one minute) have been shown to kill the virus.

Consuming raw or undercooked shellfish from contaminated waters, raw produce, uncooked foods, drinking water, and foods that are not reheated after being in contact with an infected food handler may result in infection.

Because HAV takes approximately four weeks post-exposure to exhibit symptoms, determining a source may be challenging.

People are most highly contagious two weeks prior to exhibiting symptoms. This poses a threat to highly susceptible populations and to those in the food service industry, as improper food handling (i.e. not washing hands or cooking foods to proper temperatures) is common.

But there is hope. Unvaccinated people recently exposed to the virus are able to receive the vaccination within two weeks post exposure to prevent severe illness.

How is Hepatitis A transmission prevented?

Vaccinations! The best way to prevent contracting Hepatitis A is to vaccinate. The vaccine is a series of two shots; with the second dose administered about six months after the initial vaccine.

The other important thing everyone can do everyday to prevent the transmission of Hepatitis A is to practice good hand hygiene. Hand washing should be done after using the restroom, before handling food, and after changing diapers.

Wash hands with soap under warm running water for at least 20 seconds. Rinse, then use a paper towel to dry hands and turn off the faucet.

Food handlers should wash their hands again upon re-entry into the kitchen as good practice.

Just a few more important Hepatitis A tidbits you should know ...

- Hand sanitizer WILL NOT effectively kill the hepatitis A virus. The only way to practice proper hand hygiene is to WASH YOUR HANDS!
- Oysters purchased from an unapproved source are more likely to carry the Hepatitis A virus. Why? Oysters and other bivalves are filter feeders. They eat whatever happens to settle in the sediment. That may include viruses like HAV. Oysters are not cooked to 185°F for at least one minute. If you have a compromised immune system, it is advised that you not consume raw seafood.
- If you or someone in your household has been diagnosed with Hepatitis A, and you work in the food service industry, you are required by law to report this information to your employer.
- Restrooms in restaurants should be cleaned and sanitized at least once daily. According to the National Center for Biotechnology, the only sanitizers approved for reduction of the Hepatitis A virus is a solution of chlorine and water or a quaternary ammonium solution. Both must remain on the surface for at least one minute to be effective.
- Less than 5% of cases have been identified among food workers. **To date, Florida Department of Health has not identified a case of hepatitis A transmission from a food worker to a restaurant patron.**

Vaccine Information for those in Pinellas, Pasco & Hillsborough Counties

PINELLAS COUNTY

Pinellas County Department of Health is currently waiving the Hepatitis A vaccination fee for those working with highly susceptible populations and in who work in the food service industry. No appointment is needed. Please all ahead of time to ensure the vaccine is still available. The hours are 7:30AM to 5PM weekdays. Below is a list of locations offering vaccines.

- Tarpon Springs: 301 S Disston Ave (Largo)
- Clearwater: 310 N. Myrtle Ave
- Mid-County: 8751 Ulmerton Rd, Largo
- Pinellas Park: 6350 76th Ave. N
- St. Petersburg: 205 Dr Martin Luther King Jr St N

PASCO COUNTY

Pasco County Department of Health currently does not offer free vaccinations, but has established a hotline for people who may have questions about hepatitis A. The number to call is (727) 619-0400.

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

Hillsborough County Department of Health is currently not offering free vaccinations.

For more information, please contact:

Danielle Egger, owner Florida Food Safety Systems

(727) 440-5990

Danielle@FFoodSafetySystems.com