

# Joe Ebel: Hepatitis A Cases on the Rise in Licking County

Joe Ebel, Guest Columnist    Published 2:46 p.m. ET March 2, 2019

Last summer the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) declared a statewide outbreak of hepatitis A. Outbreaks in neighboring states had begun to spread into Ohio, although Licking County had not seen any unusual activity at that time. In 2019 we already have more cases reported than in all of 2018, so the outbreak has reached Licking County.

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 can also be 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 with hepatitis A can experience mild illness lasting a few weeks to severe illness lasting several months.

Since the release of a hepatitis A vaccine in 1995, cases in the US dropped by 95 percent. The vaccine is recommended as part of childhood immunizations at 1 year of age. People born before 1995 and those who were not completely immunized may be especially vulnerable to infection.

People at increased risk for hepatitis A due to this outbreak include:

- People with direct contact with individuals infected with the virus
- Men who have sex with men
- People who use street drugs whether they are injected or not
- People who are incarcerated
- People experiencing homelessness
- People who have traveled to other areas of the U.S. currently experiencing outbreaks

People in these risk categories should consider getting vaccinated against hepatitis A. The vaccine is available through your healthcare provider, or the health department. Recent cases in Franklin County where an individual worked as a food handler has prompted calls for vaccinations of anyone who visited those restaurants during the period of transmission because they could have been exposed to the virus. While this outbreak is primarily among persons who use injection and non-injection drugs, and/or persons experiencing homelessness, and their close direct contacts, other recent hepatitis A outbreaks have been linked to contaminated fruits and seafood.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that the following persons be vaccinated against hepatitis A:

- All children at age 1 year
- Persons who are at increased risk for infection
- Persons who are at increased risk for complications from hepatitis A
- Any person wishing to obtain immunity (protection)

Keys to preventing a hepatitis A infection include getting vaccinated (or making sure you have already been vaccinated as a child) and practicing good hygiene – especially thoroughly washing your hands after using the bathroom and before eating or drinking.

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