



**Lewis County Public Health & Social Services**

# **Health Beat**

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**For release in January 2020**

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## **Hepatitis A rates climbing**

*by Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH, Lewis County Health Officer*

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) declared a hepatitis A disease outbreak in July 2019, with 27 reported cases statewide. That was nearly as many cases reported in just 6 months as in all of 2018. However, that was just the beginning. In the latter half of the year, the total number of cases increased by more than four times to 157.

As of the first week of December 2019, there had been 82 hospitalizations and two deaths from hepatitis A in Washington State. This far eclipsed the 35 total cases statewide in 2018 and 28 total cases in 2017. In fact, this was the first time hepatitis A cases have exceeded 100 since 2002. The good news is a vaccine is available to help protect you from getting infected.

This ongoing outbreak is occurring mostly in homeless populations where proper sanitation is a daily challenge, and among people who use drugs. While anyone who is not vaccinated can get hepatitis A, people who are living homeless or who use drugs are at higher risk, particularly if they don't have access to sanitation, restroom facilities and handwashing stations.

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It can be a mild or severe illness lasting from a few weeks to several months. Hepatitis A virus is spread from

person to person by contact with infected stool (feces). Many people, especially children, don't know they have virus so they can spread it without knowing.

People may get sick when they touch an object or eat food that a person with hepatitis A has handled. Usually we hear about hepatitis A in the news when there is a restaurant named as a source of infection. This may happen when ill employees are suspected of spreading the disease to food by inadequate handwashing after using the restroom. You can learn more about hepatitis A symptoms and prevention on the DOH website at <http://bit.ly/2EXofKi>.

If you're vaccinated against hepatitis A, it is unlikely you will catch the disease because the vaccine works really well. If you are not vaccinated and you do get sick with hepatitis A, you can only get infected with it once in your lifetime. Once you recover from the disease, you develop antibodies that protect you from the virus for life.

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated with 2 doses of the hepatitis A vaccine given at least 6 months apart. Vaccination is recommended for all children starting at one year of age, for travelers to certain countries, and for people at high risk of getting infected, including people living in homeless camps or who are using street drugs.

Hepatitis A vaccine is available in Lewis County from your primary care provider and pharmacies. If you think you may have been exposed, contact your primary care provider.

Whether or not any of the reported hepatitis A cases were from your county, we are all at risk. Our mobile lifestyle, combined with the growing presence of hepatitis A in Washington, means we should all be aware and protect ourselves. As we saw with the measles outbreak early in 2019, contagious diseases do not respect geographic boundaries. Not only is the hepatitis A rate climbing in this state, Washington is only one of 30 states reporting increases in hepatitis A cases.

Protecting yourself is simple. Get vaccinated and practice good hand hygiene. Immunization and thoroughly washing hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food play very important roles in preventing the spread of hepatitis A.

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