Hepatitis A outbreak making the rounds

Health officials encourage hygiene and vaccinations

BY MEGHAN NELSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Health officials are encouraging people to wash their hands to stave off more than just influenza and the common cold this winter.

Good hygiene, including hand-washing, is the second most effective way — besides vaccination — to reduce the risk of contracting or spreading hepatitis A.

According to the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD), which serves Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties, there have been more than 500 cases of hepatitis A in southeast Michigan since August 2016.

Since September of this year, Isabella County has reported four cases of hepatitis A. Before this year, Isabella County hadn’t seen a case of

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hepatitis A since 2011.

Jennifer Morse, medical director of the MMDHD, said there was one case of hepatitis A in Montcalm County in September, but it was unrelated to the outbreak in Isabella County.

Hepatitis A is a fecal-oral disease, which means it is spread through feces. One way it can spread is by someone forgetting to wash their hands after using the restroom and touching others who put their hands to their mouth.

Because of the way it is spread, high-risk groups include those with a history of substance abuse; people currently homeless or transient; men who have sex with men; inmates at jails and prisons; and people who work or live with anyone in any of those risk groups.

Of the 559 hepatitis A outbreak-associated cases in Michigan, Morse said 50 percent had been using illicit drugs, 11.5 percent were homeless or in transient housing, 10 percent were men having sex with men and 7 percent had been in a correctional facility.

"The main denominator is people living in close quarters," Morse said. "Because of how things have been with substance use, there have been congregating people. If you get one person in that setting, anyone who is a close contact is at risk."

Morse said children in daycare or school who spend hours together and are still mastering the concept of proper hygiene could spread the disease to other children and their teachers. Children younger than 6 can spread hepatitis A to other classmates and teachers, but they rarely show any symptoms of the virus.

Other people who should be cognizant of the outbreak are food handlers since they have the ability to spread the virus to several people. Individuals with liver disease are also at a higher risk, since hepatitis A attacks the liver.

"As with anything, if you've already got an underlying problem, you should especially be aware of the disease," said Ionia County Health Department Health Officer Ken Bowen.

The hepatitis A vaccine is not required by schools, but Morse and Bowen are trying to educate everyone to receive the vaccine and reduce the spread of the disease, and working on reaching out to high-risk populations about the vaccine.

"Those groups have been hard to find and vaccine," Morse said. "A lot of them don't come for medical care if they are sick, and they continue to spread. It's been challenging, and counties in southeast Michigan area are aggressively going out to...to seek these groups of individuals because they're not able to or afraid to get vaccinated."

The hepatitis A vaccine is available at physicians' offices and pharmacies and the Ionia County Health Department has a small supply of vaccines they are offering while supplies last.

Hepatitis A symptoms include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, aching joints and headaches. A recognizable symptom is jaundice, the yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes.

"The other thing that jaundice will do is turn urine very noticeably dark, like Coca-Cola, and bowel movements a pasty gray," Morse said. "Most people feel bad enough they go to the doctor, and if not, the change in urine color really grabs their attention."

For most people, hepatitis A will keep them from work or other daily activities and the disease often results in hospitalization. Most people will typically recover within two months.

"Unfortunately, some people have complete liver failure and have to have a transplant, and it can result in death," Morse cautioned.

Although the outbreak currently isn't affecting Montcalm or Ionia counties, it doesn't mean people shouldn't be thinking about the virus and taking precautions, according to health officials.

"It's only a matter of time before it is here," Bowen said. "The virus is spreading. I expect to see cases in almost every county in the state before this outbreak is over."

More information about Michigan's hepatitis A outbreak can be found at www.mi.gov/hepatitisAoutbreak online.

mnelson@staffordgroup.com

(616) 548-8273