

DHEC Identifies Spread of Hepatitis A as Statewide Outbreak

COLUMBIA, S.C. — An increasing number of hepatitis A cases in Aiken County and other parts of South Carolina has led the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to define the spread of the disease as a statewide outbreak.

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver infection caused by a virus that is typically transmitted through person-to-person contact with someone who has the infection or through eating or drinking food or water contaminated by an infected person. Most people who contract hepatitis A feel sick for several weeks, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. People usually become sick within two to six weeks after being exposed, and symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain or yellowing of the eyes and skin.

“Given the steady increase in cases, we determined that South Carolina is experiencing an outbreak,” said Dr. Linda Bell, state epidemiologist and director of the Bureau of Communicable Disease Prevention and Control. “As a result, DHEC is intensifying efforts to control the spread of hepatitis A to avoid a severe outbreak that could threaten the general population.”

This statewide outbreak coincides with the national hepatitis A outbreak that began in 2016. An outbreak is defined when a disease occurs in greater numbers than expected within a defined area and time period. DHEC previously declared a localized hepatitis A outbreak in Aiken County in February 2019.

During the past 10 years, South Carolina averaged 19 reported cases of hepatitis A annually. More than four times that amount has been reported in the past seven months. Between Nov. 1, 2018, and May 10, 2019, there have been 86 reported cases of hepatitis A in South Carolina, leading to 59 hospitalizations and one death.

So far, most cases have occurred in Aiken County, and almost half of all cases involve individuals who report drug use. Certain adults who may be at higher risk for hepatitis A include:

- People who use injection or non-injection drugs
- People who are homeless
- People who are or recently were incarcerated
- Men who have sex with men
- People with chronic liver disease like cirrhosis, hepatitis B or C
- People who are traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common
- People with chronic liver disease like cirrhosis, hepatitis B or C as they have an increased risk of complications if infected with hepatitis A

“We have established a hepatitis A task force that is coordinating efforts to control the spread of the virus by increasing vaccination rates among high-risk groups, establishing partnerships critical to reaching those groups, and conducting outreach and education efforts,” Bell said.

Additionally, DHEC is currently offering no-cost hepatitis A vaccines to individuals who are drug users, homeless, men who have sex with men or those who have a history of incarceration. Residents can schedule an appointment for a vaccination at their local health department by calling [855-472-3432](tel:855-472-3432) or visiting www.scdhec.gov/health/health-public-health-clinics.

Residents can take several steps to protect themselves and their communities, including:

- Getting vaccinated against hepatitis A
- Washing their hands after using the restroom and before eating or preparing meals
- Refraining from sex with someone who has a hepatitis A infection
- Immediately seeking medical care if a hepatitis A infection is suspected

For more information on hepatitis A, visit the [DHEC website](#) or the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website](#).