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THE ALPENA NEWS

Health officials urge Hep A vaccination DHD No. 4 offering free vaccinations

ALPENA — With the recent outbreak of Hepatitis A in Michigan, the District Health Department No. 4 is urging the public to get vaccinated against the virus.

The Hepatitis A virus is a highly contagious disease that causes inflammation of the liver and can affect the function of the organ. If contracted, it can cause fever, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, and jaundice. Adults tend to be affected more than children and present with worse symptoms.

The Michigan outbreak has been mostly in the southeast region of the state, but there have been reported cases in Northeast Michigan, as well. The medical director of DHD No. 4, Dr. Joshua Meyerson, said the particular strain of Hep A related to the state's outbreak has been worse than typical cases.

There have been 27 deaths across the state, and 80 percent of the people with reported cases had to be hospitalized for treatment.

While there is no specific treatment or cure, those who are hospitalized are usually treated with supportive care such as intravenous fluids for dehydration.

Meyerson said the outbreak was originally thought to be foodborne, but they now believe it is being spread through person-to-person contact. This type of contact includes living in close spaces, sexual contact, or coming into contact with oral or fecal germs from someone that is infected.

He said high-risk populations include incarcerated people, the transient and homeless, those who use any kind of illicit drugs — not just those taken intravenously — people living in close quarters with someone who has the disease, and men who engage in sex with other men.

In efforts to combat the outbreak and prevent new cases, the health department has been providing education and information in public places about the importance of hand washing, daily practices to prevent contracting the virus, and why people should be immunized. Each health department location also offers the vaccination.

Meyerson said the vaccine is a two-dose series that is safe and effective at preventing a person from contracting Hep A for life.

They are urging everyone to get vaccinated, from children to adults, and especially those who have an existing condition affecting their liver function.

He said some of the highest-risk populations are often the ones that do not receive regular health care or vaccinations. Therefore, he is urging the public to have children vaccinated if they have not been already. Hep A is now a standard vaccination in routine childhood vaccinations, but Meyerson said older children who haven't received it should have it done now.

"If we can get them immunized as kids, we can help prevent outbreaks down the line," Meyerson said.

The health department is offering free vaccinations to those who qualify, and there are a variety of other local health providers who can provide the vaccination.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services website offers more information about the virus and how to protect yourself. Visit [michigan.gov / dhhs](http://michigan.gov/dhhs) for more information.

Contact the District Health Department No. 4 at 800-221-0294 for information on how to get vaccinated. Kaitlin Ryan can be reached at kryan@thealpenanews.com or by phone at 989-358-5693.