Public Health Call for Increased Vigilance for Hepatitis A Infection Among Homeless Populations - June 16, 2017

Since early 2017, the Public Health Services Division in the County of San Diego has been investigating a Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) outbreak that is disproportionately affecting homeless and illicit drug users in San Diego County. To date, no common source of food, beverage, or other cause has been identified; as a result, the source of the outbreak remains undetermined. To date there are 160 cases, causing 120 hospitalizations and 4 deaths. Additionally, Santa Cruz is reporting an outbreak among the homeless and illicit drug users.

Person-to-person transmission through the fecal-oral route is the primary means of HAV transmission in the U.S. Individuals with increased risk for HAV infection include: travelers to countries with high or intermediate endemicity of HAV; men who have sex with men; users of injection and non-injection illicit drugs; persons with clotting factor disorders; and persons working with nonhuman primates. HAV outbreaks have been reported among the homeless, who have a higher morbidity and mortality when compared with the general population and an increased risk of infection due to living conditions. Outbreaks among homeless populations are extremely difficult to control and therefore require increased vigilance and screening for hepatitis A infection whenever there is clinical suspicion of infection.

Public Health Recommendations for Providers:

1. Consider HAV infection in individuals, especially the homeless and those who use illicit drugs, with discrete symptom onset and jaundice or elevated liver function tests.
2. Promptly report all confirmed and suspect HAV cases to the Santa Barbara County Disease Control Program via CalREDIE.
3. Provide HAV vaccine to homeless individuals, illicit drug users, and patients with chronic liver diseases, MSM, and other at-risk people who are not already immunized.
4. Ensure that all healthcare workers use standard precautions in patient care to protect themselves against HAV.

The Public Health Department appreciates your partnership in our efforts to protect the health of our most vulnerable community members.