

What You Should Know About Hepatitis A

You may have heard about the fish products imported to Oahu that recently tested positive for hepatitis A. The Hawaii Department of Health found the virus originated in ahi products distributed by Tropic Fish Hawaii, LLC to Times Supermarket and Shima's locations in Aiea, Kailua, Kaneohe, Kunia, Liliha, Mililani, Waipahu, and Waimanalo to prepare poke sold between April 27 and May 1, 2017. To help prevent the spread of this virus, it is important to know the facts about hepatitis A and how to protect yourself from infection.

What is hepatitis A?

It is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus, resulting in inflammation of the liver and minor to severe illness. Hepatitis A is the most common form, but hepatitis B and C viruses also cause liver disease. Unlike the other two forms, hepatitis A generally does not cause chronic (long-lasting) liver disease, but in some cases acute liver failure may develop, which can be fatal.

How is it spread?

The virus is present in stool and spreads through ingestion of food or water that has been contaminated by the feces of an infected individual. The food industry can be especially susceptible to the spread of hepatitis A if workers do not employ careful hygiene practices before handling food. The virus can also be spread through close physical interaction with someone who is infected. However, casual contact does not spread the virus.

What are the symptoms?

The time between exposure to the virus and the onset of symptoms is 14 to 28 days. Symptoms will range in severity based on the individual. The most common symptoms include:

- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin)
- Malaise (general discomfort)

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis, and recovery times vary. Hospitalization is only necessary in cases showing signs of acute liver failure. Infected persons should avoid certain medications including acetaminophen, paracetamol, and nausea/vomiting medication.

If you have recently been exposed to hepatitis A, you should contact your doctor immediately. By knowing what the virus is and how to prevent or treat it, you can help stop its spread.

How do I prevent infection?

Adequate sanitation is important for preventing infection. Frequently washing your hands with soap and warm water, then drying thoroughly (with paper or air so the drying towel is not reused) will help decrease the likelihood of contracting the virus as well as the risk of spreading it.

A vaccine is also available and given in two separate doses over a six-month period. The vaccination can protect you for five to eight years.

Is the vaccine medically necessary for me?

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices for the CDC and World Health Organization recommend the following when considering the hepatitis A vaccine.

- A routine immunization is recommended for children at age one year.
- A routine immunization is not recommended for all adults, but should be given to high-risk individuals. Examples of high-risk exposure include:
 - Household contact with an infected individual (includes sexual contact, IV drug sharing)
 - Daycare employee taking care of infected children with diapers
 - Workplace contact of an infected food handler
 - Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A
- Individuals who think they may have been exposed to hepatitis A can discuss with their doctor to see if a preventive shot is recommended with the vaccine or Immunoglobulin. A preventive injection must be given within two weeks of exposure to be effective. The preventive shot is not recommended once symptoms begin to appear, because the two-week period has been exceeded.

Please note that the risk of hepatitis transmission to restaurant and workplace patrons is very low unless you ate in an institutional cafeteria. The most common foods contaminated with the virus are shellfish and vegetables.

It is also important to note that once you are exposed to the virus, you then have long-term immunity. In Hawaii, it is estimated that up to 50% of the population is already protected from infection because of prior exposure or vaccination. Pregnant women transmitting the disease to their baby have not been reported.

Where can I get the hepatitis A vaccine?

If you would like to know if you are considered high-risk or whether the vaccine is recommended for you, please talk with your doctor.

HMAA's employer groups may also host a clinic at their business location to provide free vaccinations to their eligible plan participants. Interested employers may contact their HMAA Account Manager or HMAAwellness@hmaa.com to make the arrangements. Vaccines will be administered while supplies last. Minimum participation and other requirements apply.

If you have any questions, please contact our Wellness Department at (808) 791-7635 or toll-free at (800) 621-6998 x635.

Sources: The World Health Organization, The Food Poison Journal, eMedicineHealth