

Important health information for homeless rough sleepers

March 2018

Hepatitis A outbreak in Victoria

There has been an outbreak of hepatitis A in Victoria and homeless rough sleepers appear to be at an increased risk of being affected.

Free hepatitis A vaccine

The free hepatitis A vaccine is available to all rough sleepers until 31 December 2018, and rough sleepers are urged to get vaccinated now.

What you need to know

This document provides important information that should be shared with homeless rough sleepers to help understand what vaccines and other disease prevention strategies are available and where to go to get medical help. Please make this document freely available to rough sleepers.

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a viral disease that affects the liver. Anyone can be infected with hepatitis A if they have direct contact with food, drinks or objects contaminated by the faeces (poo) of an infected person. Previous food borne outbreaks have been associated with foods such as contaminated shellfish and frozen berries. There have also been outbreaks associated with particular groups, including people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men and homeless populations. Hepatitis A is common in developing countries where hygiene standards are poor.

Symptoms may last for several weeks, but full recovery usually occurs.

How can I be protected from hepatitis A?

Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis A infection and is recommended for people in high-risk groups. Immunisation against hepatitis A includes a course of two injections a minimum of six months apart.

It's important to remember that immunisation against hepatitis A does not protect you against hepatitis B or

hepatitis C. It is important that you take precautions to make sure you are not exposed to these diseases. Hepatitis B and C are usually transmitted through contact with infected blood.

If you are unsure whether you have been vaccinated or have had an incomplete hepatitis A vaccine course, ask your doctor or vaccine provider. If it is not possible to tell, rough sleepers are urged to get vaccinated anyway, and do not need to be tested beforehand. There is no harm in receiving a vaccine if a person is already immune.

It is important to remember that hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C are caused by different viruses, are spread in different ways and require different treatments. This means that prior infection with one type of virus won't offer any immunity against the others.

Symptoms of hepatitis A

You can fall ill any time between 15 and 50 days after catching the virus. The average time for people to become unwell is a month. Many infected people, particularly children less than five years old, show few or no symptoms.

For adults, the symptoms include:

- fever
- tiredness
- nausea
- abdominal discomfort
- dark urine
- yellow skin and eyes (jaundice).

Symptoms may last for several weeks, but full recovery usually occurs.

For more information about symptoms of hepatitis A visit the Better Health Channel online and search for 'hepatitis A'.

Causes of hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is caused by a virus. The virus can survive for several hours outside the body but persists on the hands and in food for even longer and is resistant to heating and freezing.

The virus is spread when it enters the mouth, which can happen when hands, foods or other items are contaminated with the faeces of a person with hepatitis A. The disease can also be spread sexually by oral or anal contact.

A person with hepatitis A is infectious and can spread the virus to others from two weeks before they show symptoms to one week after they become jaundiced (yellow eyes and skin).

Free hepatitis A vaccine for rough sleepers

All rough sleepers will be able to get access to a free, two dose course of hepatitis A vaccine.

All rough sleepers will be able to access the vaccine through GP clinics and other registered immunisation providers in Victoria, including primary health and community health services. Suggested services include:

- Central City Community Health Service, 53 Victoria Street, Melbourne (Wednesdays from 9.30am – 11.45am)
- CoHealth at 75 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy (Monday drop in clinic from 9am – 12pm)
- Brunswick Community Medical Centre, 11 Glenlyon Road, Brunswick
- Ozanam Community Centre, 268 Abbotsford Street, North Melbourne (Wednesday morning drop in clinic).

Why has the free vaccine program been introduced?

There is an outbreak of hepatitis A in Victoria. Most cases have been identified in men who have sex with men and some have identified as people who inject drugs. Homeless rough sleepers have also been identified as being at risk. Previous hepatitis A outbreaks reported worldwide have involved a large number of cases in the homeless population. By offering the free hepatitis A vaccine to rough sleepers in Victoria we hope to protect people and reduce the spread of this disease.

Who is eligible to receive the free vaccine?

The vaccine is free for all rough sleepers in Victoria until 31 December 2018.

The vaccine is also free for men who have sex with men and people who have injected drugs in the past 12 months in Victoria.

Why has this group been chosen?

Homeless rough sleepers, alongside men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs, appear to be at increased risk.

Rough sleepers often lack access to clean and hygienic bathroom facilities. This means it is more likely that the virus is spread when people come into contact with food, drinks or objects contaminated by the faeces (poo) of an infected person. Rough sleepers may also have other health concerns which may make them more likely to be affected by hepatitis A.

People who inject drugs are more likely to be affected by hepatitis C and/or B and therefore may have pre-existing liver disease.

It is important that all rough sleepers, men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs are protected against this disease.

Where can I access the free vaccine?

All rough sleepers will be able to access the vaccine through GP clinics and other registered immunisation providers in Victoria, including primary health services.

Prevent the spread of hepatitis

Good personal hygiene is essential to reducing the risk of hepatitis A. You should thoroughly wash your hands in warm soapy water before handling food, after going to the toilet and after handling used condoms or having contact with the anal area of another person.

People who inject drugs should also wash their hands before and immediately after injecting. If this is not possible, use single wipes with new swabs instead.

To reduce the risk of transmitting any infections, it is important that people who inject drugs do not share or re-use needles, tourniquets, spoons, swabs, water or any other equipment, even when no blood is visible. Special care should be taken when injecting occurs in groups, or when people are being assisted to inject by others. People should label or mark their syringe. It is important that when using in groups or injecting others, people must not recap someone else's needles.

More Information

If you require further information visit the Better Health Channel online:

- <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/condition/sandtreatments/hepatitis> (Better Health Channel)