

News story: Hepatitis A among gay and bisexual men

Public Health England (PHE) is urging gay and bisexual men to take extra precautions against infection of hepatitis A, as cases are increasingly reported in the community. Those attending World Pride in Madrid are encouraged to visit their genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic to request the vaccine.

Those not travelling to World Pride are advised to ask about vaccination at their next sexual health check-up.

Hepatitis A is a highly infectious virus causing inflammation of the liver, with symptoms including vomiting, diarrhoea and a flu-like illness. While it can be transmitted through food or water contaminated with faeces, the recent cases among men who have sex with men (MSM) are believed to have been spread through oral or anal sex.

Those most at risk are MSM with multiple partners, while some cases have been linked to those visiting Spain and other European countries.

Cases are more prevalent in London. However, as people travel within the UK or further abroad this summer, it is feared more will be exposed to the virus.

Dr Mary Ramsay, Head of Immunisation at PHE, said:

Hepatitis A among gay and bisexual men is significantly higher than usual, making it important to take extra care – especially if travelling to other countries. MSM and bisexual men are at highest risk and should ask about the hepatitis A vaccine next time they visit a GUM clinic.

The Spanish government has asked those attending the World Pride event in Madrid to get protected but there are some vaccine shortages locally. Therefore, those intending to travel should ask at their GUM clinics before they leave.

For those not vaccinated, infection can be avoided through careful hygiene during and after sex. The advice is to:

- wash your hands after sex (ideally buttocks, groin and penis too)
- use protection for fingering, rimming and fisting
- change condoms between anal and oral sex
- avoid sharing sex toys

Hepatitis A is usually mild, although it can last for several weeks and in some cases requires hospitalisation.

PHE is working with partners including Terrence Higgins Trust to raise awareness of the preventative measures, as well as symptoms of hepatitis A, to avoid further spread of the virus.

Cary James, Head of Health Improvement at Terrence Higgins Trust, said:

We're concerned about the outbreak of hepatitis A, a virus which affects the liver. Gay and bisexual men are particularly affected so we would urge them to follow PHE's advice around vaccination, be aware of the symptoms and follow the prevention advice.

By following these easy steps, you will stay protected and can enjoy a safe, healthy and happy Pride season.

Symptoms of Hep A can include:

- a short, mild, flu-like illness
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- jaundice (yellow skin and whites of eyes, darker yellow urine and pale faeces)
- itchy skin