

HEPATITIS A (HAV)

SITUATION IN LEBANON

Country Context

Since the start of the year, the country is experiencing 3 separate clusters of Hepatitis A outbreak in Tripoli, Zahleh, and Nabatieh. (1) As of 14 June 2022 a total of 555 cases of Hepatitis A were reported. (2) By the end of June, the number of cases of Hepatitis A in Tripoli was starting to decrease, following the chlorination of the water supply by authorities. Meanwhile, the water quality testing in the Beqaa area affected by the Hepatitis A outbreak is still showing that water is contaminated. (3) In the recent years, the country has witnessed spikes in Hepatitis A cases at the beginning of every summer and winter seasons. Although the number of new cases has been decreasing for this year, there are still ongoing fears of Hepatitis A spread. This summer of 2022, the whole country is facing drastic water shortages, forcing people to pay very high fees to fill their water tanks, if found, from unknown water sources, and there is no way to make sure the water is clean and safe for usage, putting everyone, everywhere, at risk. (4)

Rumors about the Hepatitis A virus began circulating on social media on 5/6/2022 through WhatsApp groups, mainly about children contracting the virus due to the absence of clean drinking water in locations. Since then, the Ministry of Public Health has been sterilizing water supply regularly and intensifying water safety examinations in areas of outbreak, as well as working with WHO and other NGOs to spread awareness and provide the Hepatitis A vaccine, which is still not available yet.

RUMOR #1

"Hepatitis A is inflammation of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus is transmitted primarily when an uninfected (and unvaccinated) person ingests food or water contaminated with feces from an infected person, lack of personal hygiene, and oral-anal sex #HepatitisA"

Shared on Twitter with
45 likes, 9 retweets

RUMOR #2

"The incubation period for hepatitis A is usually 14 to 28 days. Symptoms range from mild to severe and can include fever, malaise, loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)."

Shared on Twitter with
15 likes, 4 shares

Fact-checking

- Hepatitis A is an inflammation of the liver that can cause mild to severe illness. (5)
- The incubation period of hepatitis A is usually 14–28 days, (6) which means a person can start spreading the disease before they start showing symptoms and know that they are sick.
- The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is transmitted through ingestion of contaminated food and water or through direct contact with an infectious person. (7)
- Almost everyone recovers fully from hepatitis A with a lifelong immunity. However, a very small proportion of people infected with hepatitis A could die from fulminant hepatitis. (8)
- Symptoms of hepatitis A range from mild to severe and although they can include the following symptoms which were also mentioned in the rumor: fever, malaise, loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark-colored urine and jaundice (a yellowing of the eyes and skin). (9)

Symptoms can also include: (10)

Fatigue, Sudden nausea and vomiting, Abdominal pain or discomfort, especially on the upper right side beneath your lower ribs (by your liver), Headache, Sore throat, Cough, Constipation or diarrhea, Joint and muscle pain, Clay-colored bowel movements, Loss of appetite, Low-grade fever, Dark urine, Yellowing of the skin and the whites of your eyes (jaundice), Intense itching

These symptoms may be relatively mild and go away in a few weeks. Sometimes, however, hepatitis A infection results in a severe illness that lasts several months.

Who is more at risk?

- People at increased risk for hepatitis A are: International travelers, individuals who engage in anal sex without using protection (both men and women). Others would be those who face occupational exposure risk, such as those who use daycare services or work in childcare facilities. In addition, individuals who have a clotting-factor disorder, such as hemophilia and lastly those who are experiencing homelessness. (12)
- People at increased risk for severe disease from HAV infection are individuals with chronic liver disease, and those with HIV. (13)

How is it Transmitted?

- Hepatitis A is very contagious, and people can spread the virus well before they feel sick. (14)
- The risk of hepatitis A infection is associated with a lack of safe water, which can be spread due to poor sanitation and hygiene. (15) Waterborne outbreaks are usually associated with sewage-contaminated or inadequately treated water.
- The hepatitis A virus is also transmitted by the fecal-oral route; that is when an uninfected person ingests food or water that has been contaminated with the feces of an infected person. (16) In families, this may happen through dirty hands when an infected person prepares or handles food for family members, or when a person touches the diapers of their infected child.
- The virus can also be transmitted through close physical contact with an infectious person, although casual contact among people does not spread the virus. (17)
- Hepatitis A can be spread from caring for someone who is ill or using drugs with others. (18)

Recommendations: How can you protect yourself and your loved ones from Hepatitis A?

- Make sure you double-down on personal hygiene practices such as regular hand washing before meals and after going to the bathroom, and make sure the water you are using for these purposes is clean and sanitized (through chlorination or boiling prior to usage)
- Do not eat raw or uncooked food or any food that is left uncovered and outside of the fridge for more than 2 hours, even if it was cooked (19), and if possible, drink and cook using filtered or bottled water.
- Do not drink or collect water from unknown sources or those suspected of contamination, such as open water sources (such as streams or rivers) and still water sources (a lake, pond, or a puddle).
- Always boil water for 1 minute before using or drinking if suspicious of contamination or use chlorine tablets to purify it.
- Observe the conditions of personal hygiene at home, especially for children, and teach them the best hygiene practices. (20)
- Avoid sharing eating utensils that are contaminated. (21)
- Avoid touching contaminated surfaces or items that belong to an active case and then placing your hands near or in the mouth. (22)
- In case of sharing a household with an infected person, avoid sharing their personal items, and clean the bathroom after each use. (23)
- Use condoms correctly as a precautionary measure. (24)
- The vaccination is not yet available because of the economic crisis in Lebanon but it is advised to get it as soon as it is. Several inactivated hepatitis A vaccines are available internationally. (25) All vaccines provide similar protection from the virus and have comparable side effects. No vaccine is licensed for children younger than 1 year of age.
- Breastfeeding your child is safe in case of Hepatitis A infection is active with either mother or child, as long as strict hygiene practices are adhered to, in order to avoid cross-contamination. (26)

Recommendations: What to do if you suspect you and/or someone you know is sick with Hepatitis A?

- If you suspect that you or someone you know has a case of Hepatitis A, seek professional help from a primary healthcare facility: a list of hospitals can be accessed here [poster 161771013515.pdf \(refugees-lebanon.org\)](#) for doctor visits, refugees can also contact the UNHCR NExtCare Hotline **01 504020** at any time to check if they are supported by UNHCR and other humanitarian partners.
- For refugees in Bekaa seeking medical services, information, or referral services, contact Endless Medical Advantage on **76 864 721**
- You can also contact IMC hotline for referral to PHCs providing necessary services near you: **81 311 748**

Sources