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Clinical Advisory
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Increase in Hepatitis B Transmission in Lawrence Associated with Injection Drug Use

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) is alerting healthcare providers about increased hepatitis B transmission associated with injection drug use in Lawrence, Massachusetts related to the ongoing epidemic of substance use.

DPH has observed an increase in the number of cases of acute hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection reported in people who inject drugs in Lawrence. Many people who inject did not receive vaccination against HBV as children and are at risk for infection. HBV is preventable and can result in severe and chronic illness. Vaccination has been recommended for all adults 19-59 years old, and adults 60 years and older with risk factors for HBV infection since 2021. Injection drug use is a well-established exposure for HBV. An outbreak of HBV associated with injection drug use occurred in Bristol County in 2017-2018.

DPH recommends that all healthcare providers increase vigilance for acute HBV infection in patients who report current or recent injection drug use. Healthcare providers should:

1. Give HBV vaccine to susceptible individuals (not previously infected or immunized) reporting injection drug use. Testing for immunity prior to immunization is not necessary. Concern about being able to complete the full series should not prevent the administration of a first dose. Even a partial series of HBV vaccine provides some protection. The 2-dose vaccine series (Heplisav B) may be preferable to vaccine products requiring more than 2 doses.
2. Remain alert to the potential for acute HBV infection in people who inject drugs and offer HBV testing to symptomatic patients.
3. Refer patients who use injectable substances to substance use disorder treatment and harm reduction services in your community, including the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center which operates a syringe service program. The DPH Harm Reduction Program Locator (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/harm-reduction-program-locator>) can be used to identify other services.
4. Report all cases of suspected acute HBV infection to DPH promptly with as much risk history, clinical, and demographic data as you can obtain.

Background: With improved childhood vaccination, acute HBV infection has become less frequent in Massachusetts, with an annual average of 34 cases statewide for 2015-2024. Between September and December 2024, there were 4 acute cases reported from Lawrence, a significant increase over baseline. Three of the cases were in individuals known to inject drugs and with a history of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection. Most of the individuals are in their 40s and were unlikely to have been vaccinated as children.

Although the potential for HBV transmission among people who inject drugs has always been a concern, the ongoing opioid use epidemic has increased that concern. There is also risk for HCV and HIV transmission related to sharing of injecting equipment. The introduction of fentanyl into the drug supply has led to more frequent injection, amplifying the risks for viral hepatitis acquisition and transmission.

CDC's clinical guidance related to HBV infection and its prevention through HBV vaccination can be found at:
<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis-b/hcp/vaccine-administration>

For information about and a searchable directory of Massachusetts substance use disorder treatment programs:
<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/substance-abuse/providers/substance-abuse-services.html>, and hub.helplinemema.org/spa_result

For a current listing of syringe service programs (SSP): <https://www.mass.gov/syringe-service-programs>

For questions, or to report a case of acute HBV infection, call the DPH Division of Epidemiology at 617-983-6800 or the Lawrence Board of Health at 978-382-2418.