



Health Officials Urge Hepatitis A Vaccine for U.S. Food Workers

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Federal regulators and health officials are now urging lawmakers to make it mandatory for all food handlers in the United States to be vaccinated against the hepatitis A virus (HAV), NBC News reports. The recommendation comes after a spate of restaurant warnings, which have put the disease back on the map as a potentially serious concern for public health.

In April alone nearly 2,000 people received immunoglobulin shots to prevent hep A infections after restaurant workers in New York and South Carolina tested positive for the virus. In February, a scare at a seafood restaurant in South Carolina prompted nearly 100 people to get immunized against the disease. Last September, nearly 2,000 people in the Bronx, New York had to receive preventative jabs after an infected food handler caused an HAV outbreak.

For years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said that food handlers didn't need hep A shots because outbreaks of the disease have been relatively rare since an effective vaccine came out in 1996.

However, health experts are beginning to see a gap among people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s—the demographic most likely to eat and work in restaurants—who seemingly missed out on the preventative shot. New hepatitis A infections also seem to be on the rise in the United States over the past few years.

The restaurant industry argues that giving out mandatory vaccines to all its workers would be difficult. The vaccine has to be given in two doses, months apart, for a person to get full immunity. Also, the cost of universal hep A vaccinations to the companies could amount to \$150 to \$200 per worker.

According to the CDC, nearly 17,000 people are sickened by hepatitis A every year in the United States. Annually, about 95 people die from the disease.

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