

Hepatitis A continuing serious rural outbreak

Between January 1 and April 30, 1993, 281 cases of hepatitis A were reported to the Section of Epidemiology. Of these cases, 254 (90%) occurred in the Tok-Glennallen or Kotzebue areas.

Because many children with hepatitis have few symptoms or are only mildly ill, the actual number of hepatitis A cases in affected villages is undoubtedly larger than the number reported. Hepatitis A has caused major disruptions in the most heavily impacted villages and resulted in several hospital admissions as well as at least two deaths.

Of the 254 cases from either the Tok-Glennallen or Kotzebue areas, nearly all have been less than 40 years of age.

Extensive experience with hepatitis A in Alaska has demonstrated that almost all persons who grew up and reside in rural villages and are more than 30-40 years of age have had hepatitis A in the past and are immune.

The pattern of the current outbreak is consistent with those of previous outbreaks which have occurred in rural Alaska approximately every decade. As in the

past, most transmission appears to be person-to-person by the fecal-oral route; common-source outbreaks due to contaminated food or water are unusual. Generally, once an outbreak begins in a village, it has taken 6-12 months for the outbreak to subside.

Hepatitis A vaccine has recently been provided to residents of the Tok-Glennallen area and, with assistance from the Maniilaq Association, is now being made available to residents of several villages near Kotzebue. State officials are hopeful that the current outbreak can be halted with this vaccine.

The single most important step in preventing hepatitis A is adequate handwashing. Disease transmission can be significantly reduced if persons in affected villages carefully wash their hands both before preparing food or eating as well as after going to the bathroom or diapering a child.

Handwashing is especially important for persons who are around young children since many children with hepatitis A have no symptoms but are still infectious.