

Multi-Nation Child Hepatitis Outbreak Being Investigated

Health officials are working to learn more about a concerning outbreak of serious liver disease in children in Europe and the United States.

Reported cases of “acute hepatitis of unknown origin” in young children continue to climb. According to the [latest data](#) from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, there are 450 reported cases worldwide, which is nearly double the 228 cases the World Health Organization reported last week. This includes three cases in Illinois. So far this outbreak has resulted in dozens of hospitalizations around the globe, requiring liver transplants in some children, while 11 have died. The children’s ages range from one month to 16 years old.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is [currently working](#) with health departments across the country to identify children with hepatitis of unknown cause.

Researchers are scrambling to find the cause of this illness, and while it hasn’t been confirmed, it is believed a common virus among children, [adenovirus](#), could be involved. Many of the children impacted have also tested positive for a variation of the virus called adenovirus 41.

“I definitely think it’s a major concern and something that we all need to be alert and be aware of,” says Dr. Rebecca Sierra, an OSF HealthCare Pediatrician. “It seems like most recently, the cases that we’re seeing may be linked to a common cold virus called adenovirus. We see adenovirus all the time; it’s a little bit surprising that we’re seeing this major side effect from that virus.”

Hepatitis, or severe liver inflammation, is indicated by excessively high liver enzyme levels and can be caused by a number of viruses. While the most common types include hepatitis A, B, C or D, this infection – often affecting previously healthy children – is not related.

“Hepatitis just means inflammation of the liver,” explains Dr. Sierra. “A lot of people associate hepatitis with the hepatitis viruses like hepatitis A, B or C, but it can be from any virus. Recently, the increase in hepatitis that we’re seeing is not linked to one of those common hepatitis viruses. It’s linked to potentially a different, more common virus.”

According to the CDC, standard symptoms of hepatitis include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-colored stools, joint pain and jaundice.

Many of those symptoms, however, mirror the symptoms of other, less harmful illnesses. So how do parents know when it’s time to seek medical help? Dr. Sierra says to pay close attention to your child’s symptoms, and don’t hesitate to call his or her pediatrician if it seems their illness is beyond the scope of a normal cold or flu. She adds - trust your gut.

“If a parent’s mom-gut or dad-gut is telling them, ‘something’s not right with my child,’ you know, ‘I think they’re acting off. They’re more tired than they should be,’ or ‘the other kids had a similar illness and got over it much quicker,’ I would definitely encourage those parents to at least call and have us triage that, and we’re always happy to take a look at the child if they feel anything just isn’t normal,” she says.

Parents should also encourage their children to practice good hand hygiene and to cover their coughs and sneezes with a tissue or their upper sleeve instead of their hands. Children who have a fever or are feeling ill should stay home from school, daycare and activities to avoid spreading illness.

Anyone with questions or concerns about their child’s illness shouldn’t hesitate to call his or her pediatrician. To find a pediatrician near you, visit osfhealthcare.org.