

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a disease of the liver. It is caused by the hepatitis A virus. Most people infected with the virus get well within six months. However, hepatitis A can be serious for older people and people who already have liver disease. Death is possible, although very rare. Learn how to prevent hepatitis A, especially if you already have liver disease.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually spread by putting something in your mouth that is contaminated by the stool of another person with hepatitis A. It is usually spread through

- household contact with an infected person
- sexual contact with an infected person
- eating or drinking contaminated food or water
- sharing eating utensils that are contaminated
- touching contaminated surfaces and then placing your hands near or in the mouth

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Anyone can acquire hepatitis A under the conditions described in the previous section. However, rates of infection are particularly high among certain groups, and people in these groups can be considered at high risk. These include the following:

- Men who have sex with men
- People who use illicit drugs
- People, especially children, living in or traveling to areas that have high rates of hepatitis A, particularly Africa, Asia, and Latin America

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Some people with hepatitis A do not have any symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they may include the following:

- Yellowing of the skin or eyes (called *jaundice*)
- Feeling very tired
- Stomach pain
- Not feeling very hungry
- Dark urine
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Low-grade fever

How will my doctor know if I have hepatitis A?

Your doctor can tell you if you have hepatitis A by talking to you about your symptoms and taking a sample of your blood. A blood test for a specific antibody called an *IgM antibody* can tell if you are infected with hepatitis A.

What can I do to prevent hepatitis A?

■ **Get vaccinated**

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. The vaccine is very effective and can keep you from ever getting hepatitis A. You will not get hepatitis A from the vaccine.

Ask your VA medical care provider about vaccination if:

- you are in one of the high risk groups listed in "Who is at risk for hepatitis A?"
- you have any other type of chronic liver disease

■ **Practice good personal hygiene**

Because so many cases of hepatitis A are due to close contact with an infected person, you should always practice good personal hygiene, especially by washing your hands.

How can I prevent the spread of hepatitis A?

Here are suggestions on how to prevent the spread of the virus in high-risk situations:

- Boil water or drink bottled water in areas where there is a risk for hepatitis A contamination.
- Avoid eating raw or steamed shellfish, such as oysters, that live in contaminated waters.

- Eat cooked foods and fruits that you can peel and avoid eating vegetables or fruits that could have been washed with contaminated water, such as lettuce.
- Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex.

What treatments are available for hepatitis A?

There are no special treatments for hepatitis A. Most people with hepatitis A recover without treatment within a few months by getting a lot of rest and drinking plenty of fluids.

For more information, please read the handout *About the Vaccine for Hepatitis A*.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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