

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

The Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) causes Hepatitis A. Hepatitis A is a highly contagious disease that attacks the liver. It is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the US.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but certain persons are at increased risk of infection, including:

- Children and adults living in areas with increased rates of hepatitis (i.e., certain Western states in the U.S.)
- Persons traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common (i.e., Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Western Pacific)
- Men who have sex with men
- Injecting and non-injecting drug users
- Sexual contacts of infected persons
- Household contacts of infected persons

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis A virus is usually spread from person to person by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A. This type of transmission is called the "fecal-oral" route. For this reason, the virus is more easily spread in areas where there are poor sanitary conditions or where good personal hygiene is not observed.

Most infections in the United States result from contact with a household member or sex partner who has hepatitis A. Hepatitis A virus may also be spread by consuming food or drink that has been handled by an infected person. Waterborne outbreaks are infrequent and are usually associated with sewage-contaminated or inadequately treated water. Casual contact, as in the usual office, factory, or school setting, does not spread the virus.

It is important to note that there is no known cause for 50% of the Hepatitis A cases in the United States.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include an abrupt onset of

- fever
- fatigue
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- stomach pain
- diarrhea
- dark-colored urine
- jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. Adults have signs and symptoms of illness more often than children. Infants and young children tend to have very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms.

If you think you may have been infected with Hepatitis A, or have come into close contact with someone who was, then call your doctor immediately. If you do not have a doctor, go to the closest hospital emergency room.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms commonly appear within 28 days of exposure, with a range of 15-50 days.

For how long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about a week or two before the symptoms appear and is minimal the week after the onset of jaundice.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she cannot be re-infected. He or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

- To prevent person-to-person spread, careful hand washing after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before preparing or eating food, is the single most important means of prevention.
- For close contacts of a person with hepatitis A virus infection, immune globulin shots are recommended to minimize the risk of disease.
- For long-term protection, hepatitis A vaccine is best.

Who should obtain the hepatitis A vaccine?

Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for the following persons two years of age and older:

- Travelers to areas with increased rates of hepatitis A
- Men who have sex with men
- Injecting and non-injecting drug users
- Persons with clotting-factor disorders (i.e., hemophilia)
- Persons with chronic liver disease (including persons with chronic hepatitis B or chronic hepatitis C virus infection)
- Children living in areas with increased rates of hepatitis A

The hepatitis A vaccine may also be used in certain outbreak situations where ongoing transmission is occurring. Although studies of certain occupational groups (for example, food service workers, health care workers, child care workers, sewerage workers) have not shown an increased risk, such people may consider vaccination if they wish to further reduce their risk or are in communities where ongoing outbreaks are occurring. In a number of western states where rates of hepatitis A are generally higher than other portions of the United States, hepatitis A vaccine is recommended routinely for all children.

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