

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). The disease is fairly common, but the number of cases in the United States has declined significantly in recent years.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone who has not been infected with HAV previously or has not been vaccinated against hepatitis A can become infected and ill from the hepatitis A virus. About 2,500 cases of hepatitis A are estimated to occur in the United States each year; a smaller number of cases are actually reported to public health each year because many people have mild or asymptomatic infections and do not go to see a doctor.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the feces (stool). The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by the individual. In some cases, it can be spread by sexual contact or by consuming contaminated water or food (e.g., raw shellfish, fruits, vegetables).

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include tiredness, poor appetite, fever and nausea. Some people might also have vomiting and abdominal cramping. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. 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 be symptomatic.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear from 15 to 50 days after exposure; most often, the symptoms appear within four weeks.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Signs and symptoms are the same for all types of acute viral hepatitis, including hepatitis A. As a result, acute hepatitis A must be diagnosed by a specific laboratory test on a sample of blood.

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How long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about two weeks before the symptoms appear. Most people are probably no longer contagious after the first week of jaundice.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Yes. An individual who has recovered from hepatitis A cannot get it again or and does not carry the virus or pose a health risk to others.

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, doctors recommend rest, good nutrition, fluids, and treatment of symptoms to help a person recover from hepatitis A. A small number of people might need to be hospitalized for the illness.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent spread is careful hand washing after using the toilet, changing diapers, or before eating or preparing food. Avoid eating raw shellfish taken from potentially contaminated waters. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period. Disinfection of 'clean' surfaces with a 1:100 dilution of household bleach in water (i.e., approximately ¼ cup of 5.25% bleach in one gallon of water) or cleaning solutions containing quaternary ammonium and/or hydrogen chloride (including concentrations found in many toilet cleaners) are effective in inactivating HAV.

The hepatitis A vaccine is effective at preventing infection with HAV. Vaccination is recommended for all children, for travelers to countries with high rates of illness, and for people at high risk of infection with the virus. Any person who wants immunity against hepatitis A may also be vaccinated. The hepatitis A vaccine is given as two shots, six months apart. If it is given as a combined shot with the hepatitis B vaccine, you will receive three shots over a six month period. Close contacts of an infected person or those exposed to a common source (such as an infected food handler or a food known to be contaminated) should call a doctor or the health department to determine if they should obtain a shot of vaccine or immune globulin (IG) to reduce their chance of becoming ill.

How can I get more information about hepatitis A?

- 1) If you have concerns about hepatitis A, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hepa/default.htm>.