

Hepatitis A

Modeled on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); <http://www.cdc.gov/health/diseases.htm>

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus and causes inflammation of the liver. It does not lead to chronic liver disease.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Young children often have no symptoms or very mild symptoms of disease. Adults and older children are more likely to have symptoms such as fever, loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhea, and a generally ill feeling.

The skin and whites of the eyes may take on a yellow color (jaundice). Stools and urine may be dark in color. A person who has no symptoms is still infectious to others. The symptoms may appear two to six weeks after exposure, but usually within three to four weeks.

Who is at an increased risk for hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A. The disease is rarely fatal and infected persons usually recover in a few weeks without complications. Household and sexual contacts of infected persons; international travelers to areas where hepatitis A is common; men who have sexual contact with men; persons who use injection or non-injection drugs; persons with chronic liver disease; persons with clotting-factor disorders; persons anticipating close contact with an international adoptee from a country where hepatitis A is common; persons working with HAV-infected primates or with HAV in a research laboratory setting; and persons experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk.

Once a person recovers from hepatitis A, they are immune for life and can no longer carry the virus.

Is hepatitis A common?

About one out of four persons in Louisiana has been infected by hepatitis A. Most have been infected when they were children and they were not sick.

How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread by the fecal-oral route. This means the disease is spread by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of an infected person. It can also be spread when a person eats foods or drinks beverages that have been handled by a person infected with hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A can also be spread through some types of sexual contact.

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

The contagious period begins about two weeks before symptoms or jaundice appears. Most cases are probably noninfectious after the first week of jaundice or symptoms.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no special medication or treatment that can be used once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is required.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent the spread of hepatitis A is through vaccination with the hepatitis A vaccine. Practicing good hand hygiene including thoroughly washing hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before preparing or eating food, plays an important role in preventing the spread of hepatitis A.

Infected persons should not handle foods during the contagious period.

Household members and others in close contact with an infected person should obtain post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP - vaccine or immune globulin), which if given early enough, can minimize their chance of becoming ill.

Should a child infected with hepatitis A be excluded from day care?

If a child or adult in a child care facility is diagnosed with hepatitis A:

- Exclude the child or adult from the child-care setting until 1 week after the onset of symptoms.
- Immediately notify your health department and request advice. PEP administered within the first two weeks after exposure can prevent the infection from spreading to other children and families.
- Use good hand washing and hygiene practices. Wash hands after each diaper change and disinfect changing tables or pads.

Is there a vaccine available?

A vaccine is available. The vaccine is recommended for: children at the age of one; household and sexual contacts of infected persons; international travelers to areas where hepatitis A is common; men who have sexual contact with men; persons who use injection or non-injection drugs; persons with chronic liver disease; persons with clotting-factor disorders; persons anticipating close contact with an international adoptee from a country where hepatitis A is common; persons working with HAV-infected primates or with HAV in a research laboratory setting; persons experiencing homelessness; and any person wishing to obtain immunity.