

HEPATITIS A



What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis A virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months.

How common is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A still occurs in the United States, although not as frequently as it once did. Over the last 20 years, there has been more than a 90% decrease in Hepatitis A cases. New cases are now estimated to be around 20,000 each year. Many experts believe this decline is a result of the vaccination of children and people at risk for Hepatitis A.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A virus is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter – even in microscopic amounts – from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated by feces or stool from an infected person.

Hepatitis A can be spread when:

- An infected person does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom and then touches objects or food
- A caregiver does not properly wash his or her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person
- Someone engages in certain sexual activities, such as oral-anal contact with an infected person

Hepatitis A also can be spread through contaminated food or water. This most often occurs in countries where Hepatitis A is common, especially if personal hygiene or sanitary conditions are poor. Contamination of food can happen at any point: growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and even after cooking.

Who is at risk?

Although anyone can get Hepatitis A, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- Travel to or live in countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Have sexual contact with someone who has Hepatitis A
- Are men who have sexual encounters with other men
- Use recreational drugs, whether injected or not
- Have clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia
- Are household members or caregivers of a person infected with Hepatitis A

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after exposure and can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Grey-colored stools
- Dark urine
- Joint pain
- Jaundice

Symptoms are more likely to occur in adults than in children. They usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.

How is Hepatitis A diagnosed and treated?

A doctor can determine if a person has Hepatitis A by discussing his or her symptoms and taking a blood sample. To treat Hepatitis A, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and medical monitoring. Some people will need to be hospitalized. It can take a few months before people begin to feel better.

How serious is Hepatitis A?

Most people who get Hepatitis A feel sick for several months, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. Sometimes Hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death, although this is rare and occurs more commonly in people older than 50 and people with other liver diseases.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated. Experts recommend the vaccine for all children, some international travelers, and people with certain risk factors and medical conditions. The Hepatitis A vaccine is safe and effective and given as 2 shots, 6 months apart. Both shots are needed for long-term protection.

Frequent handwashing with soap and water – particularly after using the bathroom, changing a diaper, or before preparing or eating food – also helps prevent the spread of Hepatitis A.

Who should get vaccinated against Hepatitis A?

Vaccination is recommended for certain groups, including:

- Men who have sexual encounters with other men
- Users of recreational drugs, whether injected or not
- People with chronic or long-term liver disease, including Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C
- Travelers to countries where Hepatitis A is common
- People with clotting-factor disorders
- Family and caregivers of adoptees from countries where Hepatitis A is common
- All children at age 1 year

For more information, go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website www.cdc.gov and search the disease you are interested in their *A to Z Index* in the blue bar at the top of the page.