

# Hepatitis A

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus can affect anyone. In the United States, hepatitis A can occur as isolated cases of disease or as widespread epidemics. Between 125,000 and 200,000 Americans are infected each year.

## Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it generally occurs more often in children and younger adults, 15-30 years of age. Infection has nothing to do with social or income status, or personal cleanliness. About 1/3 of persons in this country have been infected by hepatitis A virus during their lifetime.

Persons at highest risk for hepatitis A include:

- those who share a household or have sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A
- travelers to countries where hepatitis A is common and where clean water and proper sewage disposal are not available
- men who have sex with men
- persons who use injectable and/or non-injectable street drugs, such as cocaine or marijuana.
- persons with clotting factor disorders who receive factor concentrates

## How do you get hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the poop. The virus then can be carried on an infected person's hands and spread by direct contact, or by eating food or drinking beverages that were touched by the infected person's contaminated hands. This is why hand-washing after going to the bathroom is so important, as it prevents the transmission of hepatitis A as well as other disease agents.

In some situations, hepatitis A is spread by drinking water or ice cubes contaminated by improperly treated sewage.

The virus can be spread sexually, primarily through anal sex, as well as through sharing of needles or other drug devices.

Casual contact as in the usual office, factory or school setting, does not spread the

virus. The virus is not spread by using a common telephone, sneezing, coughing, or being in the same room as an infected person.

## **Can the infection be transmitted from an animal?**

No. Hepatitis A is a disease of people not animals. However, eating raw oysters, clams or other shellfish may place a person at risk of infection, particularly if the shellfish came from contaminated waters.

## **How do I know if I have hepatitis A?**

The average time from infection until symptoms start is 28-30 days. Three of every four adults who get hepatitis A have symptoms that usually build up over a period of several days. Children under 5 years of age often have no symptoms.

If you have symptoms

- your eyes may turn yellow and you may have dark pee
- you may be tired
- you may lose your appetite
- you may have nausea, vomiting, fever, or stomach ache

A person can spread hepatitis A 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms appear and during the first week of symptoms. Persons with no symptoms still can spread the virus. This often happens with children under 5 years of age. Very few people die from hepatitis A, only about 100 a year in this country. Most people recover in a few weeks without complications; in some cases, however, symptoms can reappear within a few weeks. Unlike hepatitis B or hepatitis C viruses, hepatitis A infection causes no long-term liver damage and there is no chronic carrier state.

## **Can hepatitis A be treated?**

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Treatment consists of drinking enough fluids and eating well. Hospitalization is rarely needed. Recovery can take weeks to several months.

## **Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?**

Yes, but only to hepatitis A. The virus causing hepatitis A is different from the viruses of hepatitis B or C, and infection with one of these three viruses does not provide any protection against the other two.

## **How is hepatitis A diagnosed?**

The diagnosis of hepatitis A is based on symptoms and a blood test specific for the

virus.

## **How can you prevent hepatitis A?**

The best way to prevent the spread of hepatitis A is careful hand washing after using the toilet or changing diapers. Also, infected persons should not handle foods being prepared for others. Items or surfaces that may be contaminated with the virus, such as diapering tables, can be cleaned with soap and water, bleach, or a germicidal cleaning solution.

Household members, sexual partners, drug partners, or others with close contact to an infected person should receive a shot of immune globulin. Immune globulin may prevent the exposed person from getting hepatitis A, but it must be given within 2 weeks of exposure to be effective. Pregnant women and infants can receive immune globulin.

For long term protection against hepatitis A there is a vaccine for persons 2 years of age and older. The vaccination series consists of 2 doses of hepatitis A vaccine given 6-12 months apart. The vaccine is available through your physician.

## **Who should receive hepatitis A vaccine?**

- persons traveling to all parts of the world except western Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand (the first dose of vaccine should be given at least 4 weeks prior to travel)
- persons working in day care centers and food handlers
- children in communities with high rates of hepatitis A
- men who have sex with men
- persons who use street drugs
- persons with clotting disorders, such as hemophilia
- people in laboratories who work with hepatitis A virus

## **Can hepatitis A virus be killed?**

Yes. The virus is killed by boiling for 1 minute. However, the virus still can be spread by cooked foods if they are contaminated after cooking. Adequate chlorination of water kills the hepatitis A virus.

## **If I have hepatitis A, what does the Kansas City Health Department do?**

By law, physicians and hospitals must report cases of hepatitis A to the Health Department. The Health Department then contacts the infected person to determine, if possible, how they were infected, and who was exposed to them. Persons who may benefit from immune globulin are offered the shot free of charge.