



HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious, short-term liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). People who get hepatitis A may feel sick for a few weeks to several months but usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. In rare cases, hepatitis A can cause liver failure and even death; this is more common in older people and in people with other serious health issues, such as chronic liver disease.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone who has not received the hepatitis A vaccination series or has not been previously infected by the HAV is vulnerable to hepatitis A. Certain groups of people are at greater risk for getting infected and having severe disease, including:

- International travelers
- Men who have sex with men
- People who use of inject drugs (all those who use illegal drugs)
- People with occupational risk for exposure
- People with close contact with an international adoptee
- People experiencing homelessness.

People at increased risk for severe disease from hepatitis A infection include people with chronic liver disease, including hepatitis B and hepatitis C; and people with HIV.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the stool and blood of people who are infected and can be spread via person-to-person contact or eating contaminated food or drink. Hepatitis A is very contagious, and people can even spread the virus before they feel sick.

Hepatitis A can be spread from close, personal contact with an infected person, such as through certain types of sexual contact (like oral-anal sex), caring for someone who is ill, or using drugs with others. Contamination of food with the hepatitis A virus can occur during growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and after cooking. Contamination of food and water happens more often in countries where hepatitis A is common.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms of hepatitis A include jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes), loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, fever, dark urine or clay-colored stools, diarrhea, fatigue, and joint pain. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children.



Frequently Asked Questions

Symptoms usually last less than two months, although some individuals can be ill for as long as six months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Not everyone with hepatitis A has symptoms but if symptoms develop, they usually appear two to seven weeks after the exposure. On average, symptoms develop 28 days after exposure.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

Individuals with hepatitis A infection should be excluded from work or school if they are unable to maintain appropriate hand hygiene or work in the food industry for two weeks after illness onset. Children should be excluded from care centers for at least one week after the onset of symptoms. Precautions should be taken during the first two weeks of illness but no more than one week after the onset of jaundice. Longer isolation periods may be required in neonatal settings.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no medication to treat hepatitis A infections. Doctors typically recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids. Some individuals with severe symptoms will require medical care in a hospital setting.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of hepatitis A?

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is through vaccination with the hepatitis A vaccine. To get the full benefit of the hepatitis A vaccine, more than one shot is needed. The number and timing of these shots depends on the type of vaccine you are given. Individuals who are exposed to hepatitis A, without prior history or vaccination, can receive the vaccine as post exposure prophylaxis to prevent the development an infection and symptoms if the exposure was within two weeks.

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.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024),
<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis-a/about/index.html>

Heymann, D. (2015). Pneumonia. In D. Heymann (Ed.), *Control of communicable diseases manual* (20th ed., pp. 465-469) APHA Press.

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