

Hepatitis A

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What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is any kind of inflammation (a reaction which can include swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis has many causes, including viruses (type of germ), drugs, chemicals and alcohol, and even one's own immune system attacking the liver. At this time, there are five viruses known to affect the liver in particular. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. These viruses are very different from one another, but all are infectious and may cause similar symptoms. They differ in how they are spread, how long the infection lasts, and how they are treated. A healthcare provider can test a person's blood for infection with hepatitis A, B and C virus.

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It is highly contagious and can be spread easily from one person to another. Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it is more common in children. The disease is rarely fatal and does not cause chronic (long-term) infection or liver disease. Once a person has had hepatitis A, they cannot get it again. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A infection.

How is it spread?

The hepatitis A virus is spread through stool (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 is often spread when an infected person is not careful about washing his or her hands after using the bathroom. For this reason, people who live with or have sex with a person who has the infection are at high risk of catching it. The virus can also be spread in programs that care for young children in diapers and in food-related businesses, such as restaurants. Hepatitis A can be spread by eating contaminated food (such as raw or undercooked shellfish) or by drinking contaminated water. Outbreaks of hepatitis A have also occurred among people who use drugs, but, unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A is rarely spread through blood.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea and jaundice. The signs of jaundice are yellowing of the eyes and skin, clay or grey colored stools, and dark urine. Teens and adults are more likely to have these typical symptoms than children. Young children with hepatitis A often have mild or no symptoms at all. Symptoms usually last less than two months. Some adults can feel sick for as long as six months, but this is rare.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of hepatitis A, when they occur, usually appear about three weeks to a month after being exposed to the virus, but it can take from 15 to 50 days after the virus is swallowed.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Hepatitis A is diagnosed with a blood test. This blood test can tell the difference between current and past infection. There are also blood tests to measure if damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.



How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for a person with hepatitis A. Rest and plenty of fluids are recommended. Some people may need to be hospitalized.

How can you prevent this infection?

Follow the tips below. **If you make them your habits, you can prevent hepatitis A—as well as other diseases:**

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching or eating food, after using the toilet, and after changing a diaper. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers.
- Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish.
- Always wash fruits and vegetables before eating them.

For long-term protection, hepatitis A vaccine is best. Vaccine is recommended for certain groups, including:

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

Immune globulin (IG) is a shot that provides short-term protection. It is used for persons who have not received hepatitis A vaccine and are exposed to hepatitis A, or persons who are allergic to the vaccine or chose not to get it, and who will be traveling to an area where hepatitis A is common.

Are there any restrictions for people with hepatitis A?

Yes. Doctors are required by Massachusetts law to report cases of hepatitis A to the local board of health. Workers in any food-related business who have hepatitis A cannot work until their fever is completely gone and a week has passed since the symptoms started. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens and dairy or food-processing plants. This requirement also includes workers in schools, residential programs, daycare and health care facilities who feed, give mouth care, or dispense medicines.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or health care clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Divisions of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800

