April 2023 | Page 1 of 3

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. When the liver is inflamed, it can become swollen and painful. In severe cases of hepatitis, the liver can stop functioning, which can be life-threatening.

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Hepatitis A**

Hepatitis has many causes, including viruses (a type of germ), drugs, chemicals, and alcohol. The body’s own immune system can even attack the liver. 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. There are differences 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. 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?**

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Hepatitis A**

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 their 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 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 and people experiencing homelessness.

**What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?**

The symptoms of hepatitis A include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea, and diarrhea. Hepatitis A can also cause jaundice (which shows up as yellowing of the skin and eyes and dark urine) and clay or grey colored stools.

Teens and adults are more likely to have these typical symptoms than children. 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 to four weeks after being exposed to the virus.

April 2023 | Page 2 of 3

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Hepatitis A**

**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
* People who use recreational drugs, whether injected or not
* People experiencing homelessness
* Persons who have chronic or long-term liver disease, including hepatitis C and hepatitis B
* People with HIV

Hepatitis A vaccine can also be used to prevent infection in someone who was recently exposed to the virus. Depending on the person’s age and health, their doctor may recommend that they receive immune globulin in addition to vaccine.

**Are there any restrictions for people with hepatitis A?**

Yes. Massachusetts law requires doctors 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

April 2023 | Page 3 of 3

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Hepatitis A**

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: [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ccwperez%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5CFM2QRM9I%5Cwww.cdc.gov%5Chepatitis)
* Your [local board of health](https://www.mass.gov/lists/massachusetts-city-and-town-websites)
* The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), Division of Epidemiology at (617) 983-6800