

HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV).

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A infection?

Symptoms may include tiredness, poor appetite, fever and nausea. Urine may become darker in color. A person may develop jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). The symptoms may appear 2 to 6 weeks after exposure, but usually within 4 weeks. Infants and young children generally have very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms. The disease is rarely fatal, and most persons recover in a few weeks without any complications.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the feces (stool). The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by the infected individual. In some cases, it can be spread by sexual contact or by consuming water or food (e.g., raw shellfish, vegetables) "dirtied" or contaminated by sewage.

How long are people contagious?

The contagious period begins about 2 weeks before the symptoms appear. Most people are probably no longer contagious after the first week of jaundice. An individual who has recovered from hepatitis A is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone who has not been previously exposed to HAV or is not immunized can become infected and ill from the hepatitis A virus. Antibodies produced during a previous infection with HAV, or in response to immunization for HAV, protect against infection.

What treatment is available for people with hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed for persons to recover from hepatitis A.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Food handlers and day care attendees and workers should be kept home from work until 1 week after the onset of jaundice or if no jaundice then 14 days after the first appearance of other symptoms.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting hepatitis A?

You can decrease your chance of coming in contact with hepatitis A by the following practices:

- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)
- Promptly disinfect contaminated surfaces with household chlorine bleach-based cleaners.
- Avoid food or water from sources that may be contaminated.
- Obtain the hepatitis A vaccine. Individuals may wish to discuss the potential benefits of receiving the hepatitis A vaccine with their doctor.
- Household members or others in close contact with an infected person should call a doctor or the health department to determine if they should obtain a shot of immune globulin (IG) which minimizes their chances of becoming ill.