

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Some people have very severe symptoms and other people have no symptoms at all. Children generally have no symptoms.

If symptoms occur, they usually start suddenly and include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, and nausea. Other symptoms that may appear a few days later include dark (tea or cola-colored) urine, light-colored stool, and yellowing of eyes or skin (jaundice). Jaundice occurs more often in adults than in children. Symptoms can last for several weeks.

Hepatitis A does not become a chronic (long-term) infection.

What are the complications of hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A can sometimes cause a severe, sudden, and overwhelming infection of the liver (fulminant hepatitis). Persons who have other liver diseases are at highest risk for this.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no specific medications to treat hepatitis A.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

A blood test can determine whether a person is infected with hepatitis A.

How is hepatitis A spread to others?

Hepatitis A is spread by a virus found in the stool of a person who has hepatitis A.

A person gets infected when the hepatitis A virus gets into his or her mouth. Some common ways this can happen are:

- Eating or drinking contaminated food or beverages.
- Placing toys or other things in the mouth that are contaminated.
- During some sexual activities.

Children may pass the virus to family members or caregivers without ever having symptoms.

A person with hepatitis A can spread the disease beginning two weeks before symptoms develop until one week after the onset of jaundice. If a person does not have jaundice, he or she can spread the disease for two weeks after the start of symptoms.

Symptoms develop two to seven weeks (usually about one month) after exposure to hepatitis A.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone of any age can get hepatitis A. Many people do not know where they got the infection.

People who are at increased risk of getting hepatitis A are:

- Household contacts of infected persons.
- Sexual contacts of infected persons.
- Persons traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common.
- Injecting and non-injecting drug users.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis A?

Yes, hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for all children at 12 months of age. Anyone 12 months of age and older who has not been vaccinated and wants to be protected against hepatitis A can get vaccinated. Your health care provider may recommend that you get vaccinated if you are at increased risk of getting hepatitis A.

What can be done to prevent the spread of hepatitis A to others?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent the spread of hepatitis A.

Washing your hands after using the toilet, after changing a diaper, and before preparing or eating food will help prevent the spread of hepatitis A.

What should I do if I have been exposed to hepatitis A?

For healthy persons age 12 months and older, hepatitis A vaccine may be given to stop the onset of symptoms in persons exposed within the previous two weeks.

Depending on their provider's risk assessment, persons over age 40 years may also receive a product called immune globulin (IG) in addition to the hepatitis A vaccine.

For children under 12 months of age, immune globulin (IG) may be given in persons exposed within the previous two weeks.

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