

FACT SHEET

HEPATITIS A

(viral or infectious hepatitis)

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by hepatitis A virus. In children it may be very mild, but some adults who develop hepatitis A are ill enough to miss about four to six weeks of work.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, however, individuals who travel to countries where hepatitis A is common, intimate and household contacts of infected individuals, men who have sex with men and those who use illegal drugs are at an increased risk of becoming infected.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Time from infection to illness is 15 - 50 days with an average of 28 - 30 days.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the feces (stool) of infected persons. It is usually spread by putting something in your mouth that has been contaminated by the stool of a person infected with hepatitis A. Hepatitis A may be spread by food that has been handled by infected persons who do not wash their hands carefully. Hepatitis A may also be spread by drinking water contaminated with human feces and the sharing of contaminated drug paraphernalia.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Fever, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pains, and a general feeling of being ill are usually the first symptoms. These symptoms are typically followed in a few days by dark ("tea-colored") urine and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Infected persons usually feel better after one to two weeks, although they may continue to feel tired for a few more weeks. Infected children under the age of three often do not become ill.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

An infected person can spread the virus for one to two weeks before symptoms appear and for one week after jaundice occurs. Occasionally infants and children may spread the virus for longer periods of time.

Can a person get hepatitis A again?

After infection with hepatitis A, a person generally will not become infected again. However, there are different kinds of hepatitis infections and infection with hepatitis A will not protect against getting other types of hepatitis.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A?

Yes, the vaccine is recommended for all children at age 12-23 months, travelers to areas where disease is common, men who have sex with men, users of injecting and non-injecting illicit drugs, residents of a community experiencing an outbreak of hepatitis A, individuals with chronic liver disease, and individuals with clotting-factor disorders.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

Once a person is ill, there are no special medicines that will help. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Since hepatitis is an illness of the liver, infected persons should avoid drinking alcohol or taking drugs or medicines (including aspirin and Tylenol) without first asking their doctor.

What can be done after a person comes in contact with a person infected with hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin are shots given to help prevent hepatitis A. Hepatitis A is not spread at school, work, or by brief casual visits to the home of an infected person so fellow workers, schoolmates, etc., will not need to get a shot. Hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin is recommended for all household members and close contacts (including sexual and drug sharing contacts) of a person with hepatitis A. The shot should be given as soon as possible and within 14 days of last contact with someone who has hepatitis A.

How can the spread of hepatitis A be stopped?

The spread of hepatitis A can be stopped by always washing hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers. When changing diapers make sure child's hands are washed after the diaper change. Children should be taught to always wash their hands with soap after using the toilet. People with diarrhea, regardless of the cause should not prepare foods for others. **Washing hands before preparing any food is important.**