



HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly called infectious hepatitis) is an inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. There are several viruses that can affect the liver. The most common in the United States are hepatitis A, B and C. They differ in how they are spread, how long the infection lasts, and how they are treated. Only a blood test can confirm the specific virus.

What are symptoms?

Teens and adults are most likely to have symptoms which may include fever, severe fatigue, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite and sometimes pain in the upper right abdomen. Dark (tea or cola-colored) urine, light-colored or gray stool, and yellowing of eyes or skin (jaundice) may also appear. Children (under the age of 6 years of age) often have no or very mild symptoms. People with pre-existing liver disease (e.g., cirrhosis or hepatitis B and/or hepatitis C) or other diseases that affect the immune systems are more likely to become very ill.

When symptoms are present, they generally resolve within several weeks. However, it is not uncommon for a person with hepatitis A to have relapses of symptoms for up to 6 months. It is important to know that the virus may be excreted or shed in the stool during a relapse.

How is hepatitis A transmitted?

Hepatitis A virus is spread from person-to-person by the fecal-oral route. This means that the virus exits an infected person in his stool and spreads to another person by ingestion (swallowing) of the germ. This can occur by eating contaminated food (such as raw or undercooked shellfish), drinking contaminated water, or by putting a contaminated toy or other object in the mouth. (There are a small number of reported cases transmitted through blood transfusions and needle drug use).

When is hepatitis A contagious?

Hepatitis A virus is shed in the stool from 1-2 weeks before the patient begins to feel sick and continues to be shed until 10-14 days after the patient becomes jaundiced (yellow). *This means that the patient is most contagious before they know they are sick.*

What is the treatment for Hepatitis A?

There is no specific medication for hepatitis A. Treatment generally focuses on rest and comfort as recovery occurs gradually, often over a period of several weeks. Someone with hepatitis A needs to drink plenty of fluids, eat small frequent meals as their appetite allows, rest when tired, and to exercise gently as their strength returns. It is also important to avoid things that are harmful to the liver, such as alcohol, pesticides, toxic paints or glues, and acetaminophen. It is important to check with a physician about taking **any** over-the-counter medication.

How do you know if you have been exposed to hepatitis A?

The incubation period (the period of time from exposure to onset of symptoms) for hepatitis A is 15-50 days, with an average of 25-30 days. That means that, after swallowing the germ, it may take 2 weeks to a month for a person to become ill.

It is important to know that household members, sexual partners and other individuals with close physical contact with an infected person are considered at most risk for developing hepatitis A. *To be safe, people who have been exposed to the virus should consider themselves “contagious” for 6 weeks after exposure to the virus.* During this time, certain measures will help to eliminate any risk of spreading during the time that illness maybe developing. Of course, there is no need for contacts to stay away from other people.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is by a safe and effective vaccine, given as 2 shots, 6 months apart. Experts recommend the vaccine for all children starting at 1 year (12-23 months), some international travelers, and people with certain risk factors and medical conditions. Following known or possible exposure to the virus that causes hepatitis A, the following information may be important to know.

- ◆ In the workplace or school: Generally speaking, hepatitis A is not spread in the workplace or in most school settings. However, when someone works in a sensitive occupation such as food service, day care, or health care, they have the potential of exposing large numbers of people to illness. People who have hepatitis A and work in sensitive occupations must be excluded from work or their normal work activities until they are no longer contagious. Careful handwashing after toileting, diapering activities, and before all food handling, preparation and service will minimize the spread of illness in any setting.
- ◆ In the household: Possible exposure can occur if sharing bathrooms with an infected individual. To minimize the risk:
 - Wash hands frequently.
Place a roll of paper towels in each bathroom. Tear off a towel. When washing hands, household members should turn on the water and wet hands. Lather hands with soap, rub hands together well (fronts, backs, between fingers, under rings) – for 15 to 20 seconds or through 2 sung choruses of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” Rinse hands under the running water. Use paper towels to dry hands. Then use the towel to turn off the faucets and open the bathroom door.
 - Clean and sanitize bathrooms daily until the risk of infection is past. Use a dilute bleach solution (1/4 cup bleach in 1 gallon H₂O) or a commercial anti-viral product. Pay close attention to faucets, toilet handles, and doorknobs.
 - Do not prepare foods for non-household members until the risk of infection is past (generally six weeks). Do not eat from common bowls or drink from common cups/drink containers.
 - Use extra care with diaper changes. Wash the child’s hands after each diaper change wash and sanitize the diaper-changing surface after each use. Disinfect diapers with washing or dispose of paper diapers in an appropriate manner.
 - Be a good role model to children and other household members!
- ◆ Sexual contacts: Persons who are sexual contacts to an infected individual should refrain from further sexual activity until the incubation period and the risk of infection has passed (generally six weeks).
- ◆ All contacts: People who recently have been exposed to hepatitis A and who previously have not had hepatitis A vaccine should be given a single dose of hepatitis A vaccine or IG as soon as possible. Hepatitis A vaccine is preferred for healthy people age 12 months through 40 years of age. For people over 40 years of age, IG is preferred, but hepatitis A vaccine can be used if IG is unavailable. Immune Globulin (IG),

antibodies made from human blood- products, are given by injection and can provide short-term protection or help to reduce the severity of hepatitis A. Your physician and/or a public health nurse are responsible for identifying persons who may benefit from IG.

- ◆ Remember: Common sense and good handwashing are keys to the prevention and control of germs!!!

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SCPH Communicable Disease Unit 330-375-2662
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov)
Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com)
Minnesota Department of Health (www.health.state.mn.us)