

H e p a t i t i s A

What is hepatitis A?

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

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone who has not already had hepatitis A illness or has not received the hepatitis A vaccine can get hepatitis A, but those at greatest risk are international travelers to developing countries where hepatitis A is common.

How is hepatitis A spread?

A person becomes infected with hepatitis A by swallowing the virus. This can occur when an individual eats or drinks food or water contaminated with hepatitis A virus, or has direct contact with an infected person who has poor personal hygiene. Food can become contaminated by being handled or prepared by an infected individual who has poor personal hygiene. Shellfish, such as clams and oysters, may be contaminated if they have been harvested from waters that have been contaminated by sewage containing hepatitis A virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

An individual infected with hepatitis A may have no symptoms, or may have a range of symptoms including fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. The urine may become darker in color and the skin and the white part of the eye may become jaundiced (yellow in color). Infants and young children tend to have no symptoms or very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than older individuals. Most individuals recover fully within a few weeks.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms of hepatitis A usually appear within 3 to 4 weeks after swallowing the

virus, but may appear as quickly as 14 days or take as long as 2 months.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Hepatitis A is diagnosed by a blood test for hepatitis A antibodies.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

No specific medication or antibiotic is required for hepatitis A. Most individuals recover fully on their own within a few weeks.

How long is an infected person infectious to others?

An infected person is capable of transmitting hepatitis A to others as long as the hepatitis A virus is being passed in his/her stool. This usually lasts no longer than 1 week after the onset of jaundice or peak of symptoms if there is no jaundice. There is no carrier state.

What is immune globulin and what does it do?

Immune globulins are antibodies that are extracted from serum. They can prevent hepatitis A illness if they are given (by injection) within two weeks of exposure to the hepatitis A virus. Immune globulin is most often given as a result of food-related outbreaks of hepatitis A.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis A?

Yes, there is a vaccine for hepatitis A. The vaccine is available to all individuals, but it is especially recommended for individuals subject to unusual exposure to hepatitis A, such as laboratory personnel who work with the hepatitis A virus, travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis A, people living in communities with high rates of hepatitis A, individuals with existing chronic liver disease, sexually active homosexual/bisexual men, and injecting drug users.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

In general, individuals infected with hepatitis A may return to work or school when their symptoms have resolved, but they must be sure to carefully wash their hands after using the bathroom.

Special precautions are indicated for food handlers, health-care workers and child care workers and children who attend day care. A preventive medication called immune globulin may be indicated for their co-workers or co-attendees. Consult your local health department for further advice in these circumstances.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

- Carefully wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet, before preparing food and beverages, and before eating.
- Make certain that all human wastes are discarded in a sanitary manner.
- Avoid drinking untreated water.
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked shellfish.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Source: NJ Department of Health and Senior Services