

Hepatitis A

Fact Sheet



What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by hepatitis A virus.

How is hepatitis A virus spread?

Hepatitis A spreads from person to person by swallowing something that is contaminated with feces from someone who is infected with hepatitis A. Contaminated food, water and raw or undercooked shellfish can also spread the virus. The virus spreads easily in areas where sanitary conditions and personal hygiene practices are poor.

Most infections result from contact with a household member or sex partner who has hepatitis A. Because the virus is passed in the stool, children with hepatitis A who are not toilet trained can be an important source of the infection. Casual contact, as in the office or at school, does not usually spread the virus.

What are signs and symptoms of hepatitis A?

Persons with hepatitis A may not have any signs or symptoms of the disease. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children. If symptoms are present, they often occur suddenly and may include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Dark urine
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)

Symptoms typically show about 28 days after exposure to the virus, but can show as soon as 15 days or as late as 50 days after exposure. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months, but some persons are ill for as long as 6 months.

How do you know if you have hepatitis A?

A blood test is needed to diagnose hepatitis A. Talk to your healthcare provider if you think that you were exposed to hepatitis A or any type of viral hepatitis.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A once the symptoms appear. Supportive care, such as bed rest and drinking fluids, is often recommended.

If you've had hepatitis A in the past, can you get it again?

No. After recovering from hepatitis A, you will never get it again and cannot give the virus to others.

How can you prevent hepatitis A?

Vaccination and hand washing are the most effective ways to prevent hepatitis A. Always wash your hands after using the bathroom, changing a diaper, or before preparing or eating food.

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for all children one year old or older. It is also recommended for the following persons:

- Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A¹
- Household members and close contacts of adopted children newly arriving from a country where hepatitis A is common
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of street drugs (injecting and non-injecting)
- Persons who have occupational risk for infection (e.g. persons who work in a research laboratory setting)
- Persons who have chronic liver disease including hepatitis C or chronic hepatitis B
- Persons who have clotting-factor disorders
- Anyone who wants to be protected

Vaccination consists of two shots, given six to twelve months apart.

How long does hepatitis A vaccine protect you?

Hepatitis A vaccine is protective for at least 25 years in adults and at least 14-20 years in children.

¹ See CDC Travelers' Health for up to date information on countries with high rates of Hepatitis A, <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel> (accessed 5/4/12)

How can you protect yourself from getting sick after an exposure to hepatitis A?

Persons who are exposed to hepatitis A should watch for symptoms (for 2-6 weeks after exposure) and call a healthcare provider if they get sick. Close contacts may need to get a vaccine to prevent them from getting sick.

How do you kill hepatitis A virus?

Hepatitis A virus can live outside the body for months, depending on the conditions. It is killed by heating to 185° F (85° C) for one minute. However, the virus can still be spread from cooked food if the food gets contaminated after cooking. The chlorine in public water systems kills hepatitis A virus that gets into the water supply.

Can I donate blood if I have had any type of viral hepatitis?

If you had any type of viral hepatitis since 11 years of age, you are not eligible to donate blood. Also, if you ever tested positive for hepatitis B or hepatitis C, at any age, you are not eligible to donate blood, even if you were never sick from the infection.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.