



HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (hep A) is a contagious virus that affects the liver. Hep A can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting months. The virus is one of several types of hepatitis viruses that cause inflammation of the liver and affect its ability to function properly.

What are the symptoms?

People infected with hep A can have a variety of symptoms. Some people do not get sick at all but they can still spread the infection to others. Often people with hep A develop the following symptoms 15 to 50 days after exposure to the virus:

- Fatigue (feeling tired)
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)
- Dark urine, pale stools
- Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, poor appetite
- Diarrhea
- Fever

Symptoms are often mild, typically lasting one to two weeks. In severe cases, the symptoms can last several months. For pregnant women, hep A is more serious and can be fatal, particularly for women in their third trimester.

There is currently an approved vaccine for hep A. Once vaccinated you are immune for life. If you have already had the virus, your body has developed a natural immunity.

How does someone get hepatitis A?

The hep A virus is spread from person to person through contact with infected feces (stool). People can carry the virus without showing any symptoms, then spread it to other people, foods or surfaces. Most commonly, the virus spreads through:

- Sexual contact with an infected person (oral – rectal contact)
- Sharing needles and drug paraphernalia
- A contaminated food handler
- Hands that are not washed properly after using the restroom or diapering an infected person
- Contamination during harvest, manufacturing and processing
- Persons travelling to countries where hep A is common

Food sources of hep A include:

- Contaminated water
- Raw or undercooked shellfish
- Raw fruits and vegetables

How do I get tested for hepatitis A?

A blood test is used to diagnose hep A. The test can reveal if an individual currently has hep A, has had hep A in the past (resolved) or has previously received the vaccine.

How do I protect myself from hepatitis A?

The following tips will help protect you and your family from hep A:

- Wash your hands after using the restroom and changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food
- When travelling, especially to developing countries:
 - Only drink commercially bottled water or boiled water
 - Avoid ice cubes in drinks
 - Eat only freshly cooked food
 - Avoid non-peelable raw fruit or vegetables
- Talk to your doctor about getting a hepatitis A vaccination before travelling
- Cook food to a safe internal temperature using a digital thermometer
- If you think you have been exposed to hep A, see your physician immediately
Vaccination can prevent the onset of symptoms if given within two weeks of exposure
- If you've been exposed to hep A, or any other gastrointestinal illness, do not prepare food for other people

How do I keep my liver healthy?

- Decrease or eliminate alcohol, drug and/or tobacco use
- Get vaccinated for hep A
- Talk to your healthcare provider/pharmacist before starting new medications or natural remedies

How do I practice safer sex?

- Use an internal or external condom, every time you have vaginal and/or anal sex
- Use water-based or silicone-based lubricants
- If you share sex toys, cover the toy with a condom and clean after each use
- Get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) regularly

How do I practice safer drug use?

- Use new equipment every time you inject, including needles, syringes and all other supplies (like cookers, filters and water)
- Never share equipment with anyone, including your sex partner(s)
- Access Needle and Syringe Programs or Supervised Consumption Services for new equipment and harm reduction services

For more information:

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