

Hepatitis A

Patient Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease that is a result of infection with the hepatitis A virus. The disease can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness causing liver failure. Most people infected with the virus develop symptoms within 2-6 weeks of exposure. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months but can last up to 6 months. Hepatitis A can be more serious and potentially life threatening for older people and people who already have liver disease such as chronic hepatitis B or C. Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A does not turn into a chronic infection.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually spread by putting something in your mouth that is contaminated with the virus. The virus is found in the stool (feces) of people with hepatitis A and is spread when someone's stool gets into food or water. This can happen when an infected person does not adequately wash his or her hands after using the bathroom then touches other things such as food. When other people eat that food, they can get infected with hepatitis A. Usually the transmission is between people in very close personal contact. For up to 2 weeks before symptoms appear, people can be infected with hepatitis A and can pass the virus to others.

Foods themselves can be contaminated with hepatitis A virus, such as raw oysters harvested from sewage-contaminated water. When people eat food contaminated with hepatitis A virus, they can get infected with the virus.

Hepatitis A is usually spread through:

- ▶ Household contact with an infected person
- ▶ Sexual contact with an infected person
- ▶ Eating or drinking contaminated food or water
- ▶ Sharing eating utensils that are contaminated
- ▶ Touching contaminated surfaces and then placing your hands near or in the mouth

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A. In the United States, certain groups are at higher risk, such as people who:

- ▶ Travel to or live in areas where hepatitis A is common
- ▶ Are family members or caregivers of a recent adoptee from countries where hepatitis A is common
- ▶ Live with someone who has hepatitis A
- ▶ Are men who have sex with men
- ▶ Use illegal drugs, whether injected or not
- ▶ Have clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia
- ▶ Have sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A

What can I do to prevent hepatitis A?

Practice good personal hygiene

Because so many cases of hepatitis A are due to close contact with an infected person, you should always practice good personal hygiene, especially by washing your hands.

Be careful in high-risk situations

Boil water or drink bottled water in areas where there is a risk for hepatitis A contamination.

Eat cooked foods and fruits that you can peel and avoid eating vegetables or fruits that could have been washed with contaminated water, such as lettuce.

Avoid eating raw or steamed shellfish, such as oysters, that live in contaminated waters.

Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex.

Get vaccinated

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. The vaccine is very effective and can keep you from ever getting hepatitis A. You will not get hepatitis A from the vaccine.



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Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for:

- ▶ Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A
- ▶ Family members or caregivers of a recent adoptee from countries where hepatitis A is common
- ▶ Men who have sex with men
- ▶ Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs
- ▶ People with chronic (lifelong) liver diseases, such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C
- ▶ People who are treated with clotting-factor concentrates
- ▶ People who work with hepatitis A infected animals or in a hepatitis A research laboratory

People with HIV should also consider getting vaccinated for hepatitis A. Speak with your VA health care provider to see if you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

How will I know if I have hepatitis A?

Your doctor can tell you if you have hepatitis A by taking a sample of your blood. A blood test for a specific antibody called the hepatitis A IgM antibody will show if you have recently been infected with hepatitis A. Your doctor will also talk to you about your symptoms, which may include the following:

- ▶ Yellowing of the skin or eyes (called jaundice)
- ▶ Feeling very tired
- ▶ Stomach pain
- ▶ Not feeling very hungry
- ▶ Dark urine
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Diarrhea
- ▶ Low-grade fever

Though some people do not have any symptoms, hepatitis A usually makes people feel sick.

- ▶ Adults with hepatitis A are often too ill to work for up to a month.
- ▶ People with hepatitis A sometimes have to be hospitalized (up to 1 person in 5).
- ▶ In rare cases, people die as a result of hepatitis A (about 3 to 6 deaths per 1,000 cases).

Will blood tests show if I have hepatitis A, or if I have ever been infected before?

Your doctor can tell if you had hepatitis A in the past by testing your blood for the hepatitis A IgG antibody. This antibody will always be positive if you have had hepatitis A in the past, or been vaccinated for hepatitis A. If you are currently, or were very recently, infected with hepatitis A, you will have both the IgG and the IgM antibody in your blood.

If I think I have been exposed to hepatitis A, what should I do?

Call your health care provider to be evaluated and tested for hepatitis A. If you were exposed within the past 2 weeks and had never been vaccinated, then you can receive a “post-exposure” vaccination. You can be treated with either the hepatitis A vaccine or hepatitis A immune globulin.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There are no specific hepatitis A treatments. Treatment depends on how ill each person is. Most people can recover with adequate rest, good nutrition, and drinking plenty of fluid. Some people get very ill and must be monitored and receive fluids in a hospital. During the time of the infection, alcohol must be completely avoided.

Anyone diagnosed with hepatitis A should follow up with a health provider to check the status of their liver and test for hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV.

Speak with your VA health care provider to see if you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit www.hepatitis.va.gov

More information is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hepa