Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Heavy alcohol use, some medications, toxins, and certain medical conditions can cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Although all types of viral hepatitis can cause similar symptoms, they are spread in different ways, have different treatments, and some are more serious than others.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A can be prevented with a vaccine. People who get hepatitis A may feel sick for a few weeks to several months but usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage.

In rare cases, hepatitis A can cause liver failure and even death; this is more common in older people and in people with other serious health issues, such as chronic liver disease.

How common is hepatitis A?

Since the hepatitis A vaccine was first recommended in 1996, cases of hepatitis A in the United States have declined dramatically. Unfortunately, in recent years the number of people infected has been increasing because there have been multiple outbreaks of hepatitis A in the United States. These outbreaks have primarily been from person-to-person contact, especially among people who use drugs, people experiencing homelessness, and men who have sex with men.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the stool and blood of people who are infected. The hepatitis A virus is spread when someone ingests the virus, usually through:

Person-to-person contact

Hepatitis A can be spread from close, personal contact with an infected person, such as through having sex, caring for someone who is ill, or using drugs with others. Hepatitis A is very contagious, and people can even spread the virus before they feel sick.

Eating contaminated food or drink

Contamination of food with the hepatitis A virus can happen at any point: growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and even after cooking. Contamination of food and water happens more often in countries where hepatitis A is common. Although uncommon, foodborne outbreaks have occurred in the United States from people eating contaminated fresh and frozen imported food products.

Hepatitis A can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.

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Vaccination is the best way to prevent hepatitis A.

The hepatitis A vaccine is safe and effective. The vaccine series usually consists of 2 shots, given 6 months apart. Getting both shots provides the best protection against hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for:

Children

- All children aged 12–23 months
- All children and adolescents 2–18 years of age who have not previously received hepatitis A vaccine (known as "catch up" vaccination)

People at increased risk for hepatitis A

- International travelers
- Men who have sex with men
- People who use or inject drugs (all those who use illegal drugs)
- People with occupational risk for exposure
- People who anticipate close personal contact with an international adoptee
- People experiencing homelessness

People at increased risk for severe disease from hepatitis A infection

- People with chronic liver disease, including hepatitis B and hepatitis C
- People with HIV

Other people recommended for vaccination

- Pregnant women at risk for hepatitis A or risk for severe outcome from hepatitis A infection
- Any person who requests vaccination

You can prevent infection even after you have been exposed.

If you have been exposed to the hepatitis A virus in the last 2 weeks, talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated. A single shot of the hepatitis A vaccine can help prevent hepatitis A if given within 2 weeks of exposure. Depending upon your age and health, your doctor may recommend immune globulin in addition to the hepatitis A vaccine.

Handwashing plays an important role in prevention.

Practicing good hand hygiene—including thoroughly washing hands with soap and warm water after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food—plays an important role in preventing the spread of many illnesses, including hepatitis A.

Symptoms

Not everyone with hepatitis A has symptoms. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 7 weeks after infection and can include:

- ✓ **Yellow skin or eyes**
- ✓ **Fever**
- ✓ **Not wanting to eat**
- ✓ **Dark urine or light-colored stools**
- ✓ **Upset stomach**
- ✓ **Diarrhea**
- ✓ **Throwing up**
- ✓ **Joint pain**
- ✓ **Stomach pain**
- ✓ **Feeling tired**

Symptoms usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.

Diagnosis and treatment

A doctor can determine if you have hepatitis A by discussing your symptoms and taking a blood sample. To treat the symptoms of hepatitis A, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids. Some people will need medical care in a hospital.

International travel and hepatitis A

If you are planning to travel to countries where hepatitis A is common, talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated before you travel. Travelers to urban areas, resorts, and luxury hotels in countries where hepatitis A is common are still at risk. International travelers have been infected, even though they regularly washed their hands and were careful about what they drank and ate.