

Fact Sheet

Hepatitis A

What causes hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is caused by hepatitis A virus (HAV).

How does HAV spread?

HAV is found in the fecal material (stool or bowel movement) of people with HAV infection. The virus is spread when an infected person's fecal material gets into the mouth of another person. This can happen in a variety of ways, for example, when an infected person who prepares or handles food doesn't wash his or her hands adequately after using the toilet and then touches other people's food. A person can also be infected by drinking water contaminated with HAV or drinking beverages chilled with contaminated ice. Contaminated food, water, and ice can be significant sources of infection for travelers to many areas of the world. HAV can also be passed by close personal contact with an infected person, including living with an infected person or having sexual contact with an infected person.

Can HAV be spread through sex contact?

Yes, particularly when a sex partner has contact with an infected person's anus.

How long does it take to show signs of illness after coming in close contact with a person who has HAV infection?

It can take 15-50 days to become infected, with an average of 28 days.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

People with symptoms of hepatitis A can feel quite sick. Symptoms might include fever, loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, dark urine, and yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes. The illness often starts suddenly and symptoms can last up to two months, but some people (about 15%) can have symptoms lasting up to 12 months. Adults who have symptoms require hospitalization in 11-22% of cases and are absent from work an average of 27 days.

The likelihood of developing symptoms of hepatitis A is related to one's age. Most of the time, children less than six years of age have no symptoms but most adults (approximately 70%) *do* have symptoms.

How serious is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A can be quite serious. Each year in the United States, approximately 100 people die from HAV-related causes.

Can people become chronically infected with HAV?

No. HAV only causes acute infections, not chronic disease. (Both hepatitis B and hepatitis C viruses can cause chronic infection.)

How common is hepatitis A in the United States?

CDC estimates that 93,000 new infections occurred in 2002 (this includes people with and without symptoms).

Certain areas of the United States have had higher-than-average rates of hepatitis A, and it is recommended that children who live in these areas receive routine hepatitis A vaccination. (See "Hepatitis A Vaccine" section.)

How common is hepatitis A in the world?

Hepatitis A occurs widely throughout the world. The disease is especially common in countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Western Pacific. This means that people can become infected with HAV in many travel destinations, even when using luxury tourist accommodations. The only destinations around the world for which CDC does not recommend hepatitis A vaccination or immune globulin for U.S. travelers before departure are Canada, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.

How does a person know if s/he is infected with HAV?

Only a blood test can tell for sure. The symptoms of hepatitis A are the same as symptoms of other types of viral hepatitis. There is also a blood test that shows if a person has been infected with HAV in the past.

Is there a medicine to treat hepatitis A?

There is no medicine that will treat or "cure" hepatitis A. Supportive care includes bed rest, fluids, and fever-reducing medicines.

How long can a person with HAV infection spread the disease?

The most likely time for an infected person to spread HAV to others is two weeks before the infected person develops symptoms. Clearly, if a person doesn't even know that s/he is infected, it makes it difficult to protect others from getting the disease. The risk of spreading the disease becomes smaller over time and can still be present one week or longer after symptoms develop (e.g., yellowing of skin and eyes).

If a person has had close personal contact with an HAV-infected person and hasn't been vaccinated, what should the person do?

If an unvaccinated person thinks that s/he might have been exposed, s/he should call their health professional immediately to schedule an appointment to determine whether a real exposure has occurred and whether administration of immune globulin is necessary. Immune globulin is a concentrated dose of human antibodies that includes hepatitis A antibody. This preparation can protect an exposed person from developing HAV infection. It's important to give the dose of immune globulin within two weeks following exposure (the closer to the exposure the better). (See Q & A about "Hepatitis A Vaccine" for information about immune globulin.)

Can a person get infected with HAV more than once?

No. Once a person has had HAV infection, s/he is immune to the disease and will not become infected with it again.

How does HAV differ from hepatitis B and hepatitis C viruses?

Hepatitis A, B, and C are all viruses that attack and injure the liver, and all can cause similar symptoms. Usually people get HAV infection from close personal contact with an infected person. Hepatitis B and C viruses are spread when an infected person's blood or body fluids

enters another person's bloodstream. Hepatitis B and C virus infections can cause lifelong liver problems. Hepatitis A will not. There are vaccines that will protect people from hepatitis A and hepatitis B. At this time, no vaccine protects people from hepatitis C. If a person has had one type of viral hepatitis in the past, it is still possible to get the other types.

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This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.

Connecticut Department of Public Health
410 Capitol Avenue
P.O. Box 340308
Hartford, CT 06134-0308
Phone: (860) 509-7929
FAX: (860) 509-7945
www.state.ct.us/dph