

# Infection Prevention and You



## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a viral infection that causes inflammation of the liver. It is usually a mild illness, but in some instances, it can cause severe liver damage. A person can get Hepatitis A by ingesting food or drink contaminated with fecal matter, or by coming in contact with an object that was contaminated with feces (stool) from a person who has Hepatitis A.

### Hepatitis A spreads from person-to-person:

- When an infected person does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom and touches other objects or food.
- When a parent or caregiver does not properly wash his or her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person.
- When someone has sex or sexual contact with an infected person.

Hepatitis A is most commonly spread by eating or drinking food or water that is contaminated with the virus. This is more likely to occur in countries with poor sanitation or personal hygiene. The food and drinks most likely to be contaminated are fruits, vegetables, shellfish, ice, and water. In the US, the chlorination of the water kills the Hepatitis A virus that enters the water supply.

### Signs and symptoms of Hepatitis A

Some people, especially children, have no symptoms of illness. Common symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes).

These symptoms occur from 2-6 weeks after exposure and usually last less than 2 months, but may last for as long as 6 months. Even though a person has no symptoms, they are still able to transmit the virus to others. In rare cases, Hepatitis A can cause serious liver disease, and even liver failure. While there is no treatment for Hepatitis A, rest, adequate nutrition, and hydration are recommended.

There is a safe and effective vaccine to prevent Hepatitis A. This vaccine is recommended for:

- All children at age 1
- Travelers to countries that have a high rate of Hepatitis A
- Men who have sexual contact with other men
- Users of injectable and non-injectable illegal drugs
- People with chronic liver disease like Hepatitis B or C
- People who are treated with lifelong clotting factors
- People who work with Hepatitis A -infected primates or with the Hepatitis A virus in a research laboratory setting

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- Healthcare workers who have occupational risk for Hepatitis A infection. No other groups of healthcare workers have been shown to be at increased risk for Hepatitis A infection because of occupational exposure.

This vaccine is given in two-shot doses, 6 months apart. The two injections provide long-term protection. Persons who have had a severe allergic reaction to the first shot should not receive the second. If allergic to any part of the vaccine, it should not be given. Children younger than one year should not receive the vaccine. This should be discussed with your physician.

The Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for people traveling to both urban and rural areas of countries where Hepatitis A is common. Even those staying in luxury resorts, or who report good hygiene practices, should receive the Hepatitis A vaccine. Travelers can lessen their risk by avoiding potentially contaminated food or water, uncooked shellfish, or uncooked, unpeeled fruits or vegetables. Risk increases with a longer duration of travel, eating in rural areas, hiking in backcountries, or for those who eat or drink in areas with poor sanitation.

Since a safe vaccine exists, travelers should plan vaccination for at least two weeks before the start of their trip. If there is less than two weeks from the planned start of the trip, travelers should still get the vaccination since some protection may be provided.

**Additional resources:**

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HAV/HAVfaq.htm>

<http://www.hepfi.org/>

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