

# Infection Prevention and You



## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a vaccine-preventable, 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.

### How does hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is highly contagious and spreads from person-to-person:

- When an infected person does not properly wash his or her hands 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; or
- When someone travels to, or lives in, an area where hepatitis A is common.

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 can kill the hepatitis A virus that enters the water supply.

### What are 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 can occur two to six weeks after exposure and usually last less than two months, but may last for as long as six 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.

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## How do you prevent hepatitis A?

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. The vaccination is safe and effective, and 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 illicit drugs;
- People with chronic liver disease like hepatitis B or C;
- People who are treated with lifelong clotting factors;
- People who have an occupational risk for hepatitis A infection; and
- People who are homeless or incarcerated, and those who work with these individuals.

This vaccine is given in two-shot doses, six months apart. The two injections provide long-term protection against hepatitis A. 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.

Travelers to countries where hepatitis A is common should plan to get vaccinated 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 because some protection may be provided.

## Recent risks of hepatitis A in the United States

Since March 2017, several very large outbreaks of hepatitis A have been reported in the United States affecting multiple states including California, Kentucky, Michigan, Colorado, and Utah. Primary risks identified with these outbreaks include homelessness and drug use. More information on these outbreaks can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website:

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/outbreaks/2017March-HepatitisA.htm>.

## How do you best protect yourself and others from hepatitis A?

The best ways to protect yourself and others from hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. It is equally as important to prevent the spread of germs through hand hygiene practices. Wash your hands after using the restroom and after changing diapers. Wash your hands before eating or preparing food.

### Additional resources

- The CDC—Hepatitis A Questions and Answers <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/afaq.htm>
- California Department of Public Health—Hepatitis A Outbreak <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/Hepatitis-A-Outbreak.aspx>
- The WHO—Hepatitis A <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs328/en/>
- APIC Consumer Alert—Hepatitis <https://apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=hepatitis>

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