

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease caused by hepatitis A virus (HAV).

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis A?

Persons with hepatitis A virus infection might not have any signs or symptoms of the disease. Older persons are more likely to have symptoms than children. If symptoms are present, they usually occur abruptly and can include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). Symptoms usually last less than 2 months; a few persons are ill for as long as 6 months. Symptoms of hepatitis A usually occur 2-6 weeks after exposure to the virus.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms usually occur 15-50 days after exposure.

Can persons become re-infected with HAV after recovering from hepatitis A?

No. IgG antibodies to HAV, which appear early in the course of infection, provide lifelong protection against the disease.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

A blood test (IgM anti-HAV) is needed to diagnose hepatitis A. Talk to your doctor or someone from your local health department if you suspect that you have been exposed to hepatitis A or any type of viral hepatitis.

How is hepatitis A virus transmitted?

Hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter — even in microscopic amounts — from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated by the feces, or stool, of an infected person.

I think I have been exposed to hepatitis A. What should I do?

If you have any questions about potential exposure to hepatitis A, call your health care provider or your local or state health department.

If you were recently exposed to hepatitis A virus and have not been vaccinated against hepatitis A, you might benefit from an injection of either immune globulin or hepatitis A vaccine. However, the vaccine or immune globulin must be given within the first 2 weeks after exposure to be effective. A health professional can decide what is best on the basis of your age and overall health.

What should I do if I ate at a restaurant that had an outbreak of hepatitis A?

Talk to your healthcare provider or a local health department official for guidance. Outbreaks usually result from one of two sources of contamination: an infected food handler or an infected food source. Your health department will investigate the cause of the outbreak.

Keep in mind that most people do not get sick when someone at a restaurant has hepatitis A. However, if an infected food handler is infectious and has poor hygiene, the risk goes up for patrons of that restaurant. In such cases, health officials might try to identify patrons and provide hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin if they can

find them within 2 weeks of exposure.

On rare occasions, the source of the infection can be traced to contaminated food. Foods can become contaminated at any point along the process: growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and even after cooking. In these cases, health officials will try to determine the source of the contamination and the best ways to minimize health threats to the public.

What products are available to prevent hepatitis A virus infection?

Two products are used to prevent hepatitis A virus infection: immune globulin and hepatitis A vaccine.

- Immune globulin is a substance made from human blood plasma that contains antibodies that protect against infection. It is given as a shot and provides short-term protection (approximately 3 months) against hepatitis A. Immune globulin can be given either before exposure to the hepatitis A virus (such as before travel to a country where hepatitis A is common) or to prevent infection after exposure to the hepatitis A virus. Immune globulin must be given within 2 weeks after exposure for the best protection.
- Hepatitis A vaccine has been licensed in the United States for use in persons 12 months of age and older. The hepatitis A vaccine is a shot of inactive hepatitis A virus that stimulates the body's natural immune system. After the vaccine is given, the body makes antibodies that protect a person against the virus. An antibody is a substance found in the blood that is produced in response to a virus invading the body. These antibodies are then stored in the body and will fight off the infection if a person is exposed to the virus in the future.

Who should get vaccinated against hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for:

- All children at age 1 year,
- Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A,
- Men who have sexual contact with other men,
- Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs,
- People with chronic (lifelong) liver diseases, such as infection with 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.

How is the hepatitis A vaccine given?

The hepatitis A vaccine is given as 2 shots, 6 months apart. The hepatitis A vaccine also comes in a combination form, containing both hepatitis A and B vaccine, that can be given to persons 18 years of age and older. This form is given as 3 shots, over a period of 6 months.

Is the hepatitis A vaccine effective?

Yes, the hepatitis A vaccine is highly effective in preventing hepatitis A virus infection. Protection begins approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the first injection. A second injection results in long-term protection.

Is the hepatitis A vaccine safe?

Yes, the hepatitis A vaccine is safe. No serious side effects have resulted from the hepatitis A vaccine. Soreness at the injection site is the most common side effect

reported. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that a serious problem could occur after someone gets the vaccine. However, the potential risks associated with hepatitis A are much greater than the potential risks associated with the hepatitis A vaccine. Before the hepatitis A vaccine became available in the United States, more than 250,000 people were infected with hepatitis A virus each year. Since the licensure of the first Hepatitis A vaccine in 1995, millions of doses of hepatitis A vaccine have been given in the United States and worldwide.

Who should not receive the hepatitis A vaccine?

People who have ever had a serious allergic reaction to the hepatitis A vaccine or who are known to be allergic to any part of the hepatitis A vaccine should not receive the vaccine. Tell your doctor if you have any severe allergies. Also, the vaccine is not licensed for use in infants under age 1 year.

Why is the hepatitis A vaccine recommended before traveling?

Traveling to places where Hepatitis A virus is common puts a person at high risk for hepatitis A. The risk exists even for travelers to urban areas, those who stay in luxury hotels, and those who report that they have good hygiene and are careful about what they eat and drink. Travelers can minimize their risk by avoiding potentially contaminated water or food, such as drinking beverages (with or without ice) of unknown purity, eating uncooked shellfish, and eating uncooked fruits or vegetables that are not peeled or prepared by the traveler personally. Risk for infection increases with duration of travel and is highest for those who live in or visit rural areas, trek in back-country areas, or frequently eat or drink in settings with poor sanitation. Since a simple, safe vaccine exists, experts recommend that travelers to certain countries be vaccinated.

How soon before travel should the hepatitis A vaccine be given?

The first dose of hepatitis A vaccine should be given as soon as travel is planned. Two weeks or more before departure is ideal, but any time before travel will provide some protection.

I'm leaving for my trip in a few days. Can I still get the hepatitis A vaccine?

Experts now say that the first dose of hepatitis A vaccine can be given at any time before departure. This will provide some protection for most healthy persons.

Will the hepatitis A vaccine protect someone from other forms of hepatitis?

Hepatitis A vaccine will only protect someone from hepatitis A. A separate vaccine is available for hepatitis B. There is also a combination vaccine that protects a person from hepatitis A and hepatitis B. No vaccine is available for hepatitis C at this time.

Can hepatitis A vaccine be given to immunocompromised persons, such as hemodialysis patients or persons with AIDS?

Yes. Because hepatitis A vaccine is inactivated (not "live"), it can be given to people with compromised immune systems.

Is it harmful to have an extra dose of hepatitis A vaccine or to repeat the entire hepatitis A vaccine series?

No, getting extra doses of hepatitis A vaccine is not harmful.

What should be done if the last dose of hepatitis A vaccine is delayed?

The second or last dose should be given by a health professional as soon as possible. The first dose does not need to be given again.

Where can I get the hepatitis A vaccine?

Speak with your health professional or call your local public health department; they may offer free or low-cost vaccines for adults. For children, check out <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/parents/qa-detailed.html>