

HEPATITIS A

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and can be caused by some diseases, drugs, alcohol, bacteria and viruses. Hepatitis may cause the liver to suffer damages and lose its ability to perform important functions, such as storing energy for the body, removing poisons from the blood, producing bile for digestion, and breaking down proteins, fats, and carbohydrates.

Some of the most common forms of hepatitis are hepatitis A, B, and C, which are caused by three different viruses. Different forms of hepatitis differ in their methods of transmission, prevention, and treatment. This article will focus on hepatitis A.

How is hepatitis A transmitted?

The hepatitis A virus causes Hepatitis A. This disease is usually transmitted through food, drinks, or objects contaminated with the waste products (feces) of an infected person. This can happen when an infected person does not wash his or her hands properly after using the restroom and touches other food or objects. Hepatitis A virus can also be spread from person to person through oral-anal sexual contact. In countries with poor sanitary conditions, people can be infected by drinking water contaminated with the virus. Foods most commonly contaminated are fruits, vegetables, and shellfish. It is important to note that an infected person can spread the virus before showing any symptoms of the disease.

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Although people of any age and ethnic background can get hepatitis A, the risk increases for persons who:

- Travel to or live in countries where hepatitis A is prevalent (Central or South

America, Mexico, parts of Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe)

- Use illegal drugs
- Live with someone who has hepatitis A
- Engage in sexual activities with someone who has hepatitis A
- Have other forms of hepatitis or liver disease
- Have blood-clotting disorders such as hemophilia

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Some people who have been infected by the hepatitis A virus never get sick or develop any symptoms. For those who do show symptoms, they can occur 2 to 7 weeks after the infection.

Common symptoms of hepatitis A include:

- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Muscle ache
- Mild fever
- Dark urine
- Abdominal pain or discomfort
- Jaundice – yellowing of the skin and eyes

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Hepatitis A can be diagnosed by blood tests. Talk to your healthcare providers right away if you have symptoms or if you think you have been exposed to the virus.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There are no specific treatments to cure hepatitis A. Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A is usually an acute condition, which occurs suddenly and does not turn into a chronic disease. Some infected people never get sick from the virus, and most people who do develop symptoms recover completely within 2

months. For patients with other medical problems or other forms of hepatitis, they may take longer to recover from hepatitis A and/or have more severe symptoms. Hepatitis A does not usually lead to long-term liver problems.

People with hepatitis A are recommended to rest well, maintain a balanced diet, drink lots of fluids, and avoid alcohol. Certain types of medications should also be avoided; please consult your healthcare providers for details. In very rare cases, if severe complications such as intense pain, dehydration, and liver failure occur, the patient may be hospitalized or need a liver transplant.

Can hepatitis A be prevented?

Yes! The most effective way to prevent hepatitis A is through vaccination. In addition, practicing good personal hygiene reduces the risk of catching and/or spreading the virus.

Remember to:

1. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water
 - after using the restroom
 - before preparing food
 - after changing diapers
2. Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly and peel before eating
3. Avoid raw or undercooked seafood especially shellfish
4. Avoid eating raw fruits and vegetables, drinking tap water (including ice) when traveling to high risk countries

What is hepatitis A vaccination?

Hepatitis A vaccination includes a series of 2 shots, given at least 6 months apart. Completion of two shots provides long-lasting protection against the hepatitis A virus. This vaccine is recommended for all children above one year old, international travelers and people who are at high risk of the infection.

A combination vaccine containing both hepatitis A and B vaccines is also available.

This vaccine is recommended for persons 18 years of age and older. It includes 3 shots, given over a period of 6 months.

Since the introduction of the hepatitis A vaccine in 1995, rates of hepatitis A in the United States have declined dramatically. Anyone who wishes to be protected from hepatitis A can talk to his or her doctor about receiving this safe and effective vaccination.

For more information on hepatitis A:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>