

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

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

How is the hepatitis A virus transmitted?

The hepatitis A virus is spread from person to person by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A. This type of transmission is called “fecal-oral.” For this reason, the virus is more easily spread in areas where there are poor sanitary conditions or where good personal hygiene is not observed. Most infections result from contact with a household member or sex partner who has hepatitis A. Casual contact, such as in the office, factory, or school setting, does not spread the virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

People infected with hepatitis A may 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 may include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

Is there a cure for hepatitis A?

While there is no specific treatment for hepatitis A except supportive care, symptoms usually last less than 2 months; a few persons are ill for as long as 6 months. The average incubation period for hepatitis A is 28 days, with a range of 15-50 days.

How would I find out if I have hepatitis A?

Talk to your doctor or someone from your local health department if you suspect that you may have hepatitis A or any type of viral hepatitis.

How can I prevent transmitting hepatitis A?

The most important way to prevent transmitting hepatitis A (and many other infections) is to always wash your hands after using the bathroom, after changing a diaper, or before preparing or eating any food.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A vaccine has been licensed in the U.S. for use in people 2 years of age or older. The vaccine is recommended (before exposure to the hepatitis A virus) for persons who are more likely to get hepatitis A virus infection or who are more likely to get seriously ill if they do get hepatitis A. For persons who have already been exposed to the hepatitis A virus, immune globulin, a preparation of antibodies, can be given. It must be administered within 2 weeks of exposure to hepatitis A for maximum protection. Immune globulin can also be given before exposure for short-term protection against hepatitis A.

Who should be vaccinated against hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A vaccination provides protection before a person is exposed to the virus. It is

recommended for the following groups, who are at increased risk for infection:

- People traveling to or working in countries that have high or intermediate rates of hepatitis A
- Children in states, counties, and communities where rates of hepatitis A were/are at least twice the national average during the baseline period of 1987-1997
- Men who have sex with men
- Injecting and noninjecting drug users
- People who have an occupational risk for infection, such as those working with primates or in research facilities
- People with chronic liver disease
- People with clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia

Should food service workers or health care workers receive the vaccine for hepatitis A?

No. Although persons who work as food handlers have a critical role in common-source foodborne outbreaks, they are not at increased risk for hepatitis A because of their occupation. Health care workers are not at increased risk for hepatitis A. If a patient with hepatitis A is admitted to a hospital, routine infection control precautions will prevent transmission to hospital staff.

After someone has had hepatitis A are they immune?

Yes. Someone who has recovered from hepatitis A cannot get it again.

For specific concerns about hepatitis A, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Communicable Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.