

Hepatitis A

(infectious hepatitis)

Disease Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it occurs more frequently in children.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis A is transmitted by fecal/oral spread. The virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body and is passed in the stool. If careful handwashing with soap is not done, the virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by that individual. In some cases, it can be spread by consuming water contaminated with sewage. Hepatitis A virus is not normally spread to classroom contacts or work associates.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. Infants and young children tend to have very mild or no symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to six weeks after exposure, but usually three to four weeks after exposure.

For how long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about two weeks before the symptoms appear, and continues up to one week after onset of jaundice.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent spread is careful handwashing after using the toilet. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period. Household members, daycare contacts, or others in close contact with an infected person should call a doctor or the health department to obtain a shot of immune globulin which minimizes the chances of becoming ill. In normal working and classroom situations, contacts do not need to receive immune globulin.

Hepatitis A vaccine is now available and prevents infection if given at least two weeks before exposure to the hepatitis A virus. Individuals who may be at increased risk of infection with hepatitis A should contact their doctor to discuss the benefits of receiving hepatitis A vaccine.