

BACKGROUND

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A is one of several types of hepatitis viruses that can cause illness.

WHO DOES THE ISSUE IMPACT?

Hepatitis A is most likely to affect:

- People with direct contact with someone who has hepatitis A;
- Travelers to [countries where hepatitis A is common](#);
- People who live with a person infected with hepatitis A;
- Men who have sexual contact with other men;
- Household members or caregivers of a recent adoptee from countries where hepatitis A is common;
- People working with nonhuman primates;
- People who use injected or noninjected illicit drugs; and
- People with clotting-factor disorder, such as hemophilia.

Recent large and prolonged outbreaks have occurred across the United States among homeless populations, people who use drugs and men who have sex with men.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

People infected with hepatitis A may not have any symptoms of the disease. Adults are more likely to have symptoms than children. If symptoms are present, they occur quickly and may include:

- Fever;
- Loss of appetite;
- Nausea;
- Vomiting;
- Stomach pain;
- Dark urine;
- Light-colored stools; and
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

The average incubation period for hepatitis A is 28 days but can range from 15-50 days. While symptoms usually last less than two months, some people can remain ill for as long as six months. Deaths from hepatitis A are rare.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

Hepatitis A is highly contagious. Most infected individuals are very contagious shortly after developing symptoms, but hepatitis A can be spread from two weeks before symptoms appear to a few weeks after infection. Hepatitis A can survive outside the body for months, depending on environmental conditions.

Hepatitis A is spread from person to person when putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with feces of a person infected with hepatitis A disease. For this reason, hepatitis A is more easily spread through food and water, particularly in locations and situations where there are poor sanitary conditions or where standard handwashing practices are not observed.

Most infections result from close contact with a hepatitis A-infected household member, especially young children who may show little clinical evidence of infection.

Hepatitis A can also be spread by having sex with someone who has the virus.

Casual contact, such as sitting next to someone or hugging someone who is infected, will not spread the virus.

DISEASE PATTERNS

Rates of hepatitis A in the United States are decreasing over time, especially because children are now routinely vaccinated against hepatitis A. In recent years, reported illnesses of hepatitis A have dropped below 5,000 each year in the United States. However, due to recent large outbreaks, rates are increasing within some communities.

From 2010-2015, there were approximately 50 cases of acute hepatitis A in Pennsylvania each year.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is through vaccination with the hepatitis A vaccine. Vaccination is recommended for all children, travelers to certain countries and people at high risk for infection or complications (e.g., those with liver disease). In light of recent outbreaks, current recommendations include vaccination for those experiencing homelessness, people who use injected and noninjected illegal drugs, and men who have sex with men.

Hepatitis A can also be prevented by washing your hands after using the bathroom or changing a diaper, and before preparing or eating food.

If you have been exposed to hepatitis A, you should contact your doctor or a health professional, as you may be able to receive post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), with hepatitis A vaccine and/or immune globulin, which can prevent a disease after someone is exposed to it. PEP for hepatitis A should be given within two weeks after exposure to be most effective.

There are no specific treatments for hepatitis A. People sick with symptoms of hepatitis A should:

- Get plenty of rest;
- Eat a healthy diet;
- Stay hydrated;
- Avoid alcohol; and
- Consult your health care provider before taking any medications, including over-the-counter drugs.

TESTS AND DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosing hepatitis A requires a blood test. Talk to your doctor if you suspect that you have been exposed to hepatitis A. This is especially important for persons working as food handlers, in child care centers, or in health care settings.

Unlike some other hepatitis infections, hepatitis A does not result in chronic (long-term) illness. In rare cases, it can cause sudden, complete loss of liver function ("liver failure"), especially among older adults or people with other types of chronic liver disease.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

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

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hepatitis-a/basics/definition/CON-20022163>