

HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by a virus.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The virus is found in the feces (stool) of an infected person. The virus is spread from person to person by the fecal-oral route. If persons who have hepatitis A do not wash their hands thoroughly after a bowel movement, they can spread the virus to everything they touch. People often become infected after they eat uncooked food prepared by an infected person, after changing a diaper or assisting an infected child with toileting, and not washing their hands afterwards. It may also be spread through sexual contact. Contaminated water and raw shellfish may also be sources of the infection.

What are symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms start with fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, and gray or clay-colored stools. Jaundice (yellow coloring) may develop in the eyes or skin. Children may not have any symptoms or only mild illness while adults almost always have symptoms. The disease varies, from a mild illness lasting 1-2 weeks, to a more severe illness that can take months to recover. Relapses can occur, but hepatitis A does not become a chronic infection.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear between 15-50 days after exposure, with an average of 4 weeks.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

The virus is diagnosed by blood tests.

How long is a person infectious (contagious)?

An infected person is contagious with hepatitis A from about 2 weeks before symptoms begin until 1 week after jaundice appears.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. People ill with hepatitis A should avoid alcohol or drug use, and use medications (both prescription and non-prescription) only with the approval of their health care provider. Hepatitis A does not become chronic, and once the illness resolves, lifetime immunity develops. Hepatitis A vaccine is the best way to prevent an infection.

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What should I do if I am exposed to hepatitis A?

Call your health care provider immediately. Exposures include household members, sexual partners, daycare contacts and those who have eaten food prepared by someone who has hepatitis A.

- Healthy persons between the ages of 12 months and 40 years should receive hepatitis A vaccine.
- For persons over the age of 40 years immunoglobulin (IG) is recommended, although vaccine can be used if IG is not available. The hepatitis A vaccine is also recommended for future protection as well.
- IG should also be used for children under the age of 12 months, immune compromised persons, persons who have been diagnosed with chronic liver disease, and persons for whom vaccine is contraindicated.

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

A vaccine for hepatitis A is available for persons 12 months of age or older. A booster dose of vaccine is given 6-12 months after the first dose.

Who should get vaccinated?

- Travelers or workers in countries with high rates of hepatitis A (Central and South Americas, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Mexico, Asia excluding Japan, Africa, and southern or eastern Europe)
- Persons who live in communities with high rates of hepatitis A
- Persons who have oral-anal sexual contact
- Persons who use street drugs
- Persons with chronic liver disease or clotting-factor disorders

What should an infected person do if they are a childcare worker, food handler, or health care provider? What should parents do if their ill child attends a daycare?

Notify Snohomish Health District (425-339-5278) if you or anyone in your home becomes ill with hepatitis A. If you are employed in childcare, food-handling, or healthcare, notify your employer and do not return to work until cleared by public health. If your child attends childcare, notify your provider and keep your child home. If your child is in a childcare where someone has hepatitis A, do not transfer your child to another care facility. Even though your child appears well, he/she could still be infected; transferring him/her to another childcare could start an outbreak of hepatitis A in the new center.

Hepatitis A is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday - Friday, 8AM - 5 PM.