

Facts About Hepatitis A for Adults

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). The virus is found in the stools of people infected with HAV. The infection is spread by the fecal-oral route, such as by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. It can also be spread through close person-to-person contact such as household or sexual contact with an infected person.

Symptoms

The effects of HAV infection differ from person to person. Following HAV infection some individuals may lack symptoms but still pose a transmission risk to others. Generally, older people have more severe symptoms than children. Symptoms may include fever, malaise, fatigue, appetite loss, nausea, abdominal pain or discomfort, diarrhea, dark urine and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

The average time between exposure to HAV and the development of symptoms is about 30 days. Symptoms commonly last for less than two months, but in approximately 10 percent to 15 percent of people who get the disease the symptoms might return and continue on and off for up to six months.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A once it is contracted.

Prevention

Hepatitis A vaccine can prevent HAV infection. Two doses are needed six to 18 months apart to ensure long-term protection. For travelers, the vaccine series should be started as soon as travel is considered. One dose of vaccine administered 2- 4 weeks before departure may provide adequate protection for most healthy individuals. Persons who recently have been exposed to HAV and who previously have not received hepatitis A vaccine should be administered a single dose of vaccine or immune globulin (IG) within two weeks of the exposure to prevent hepatitis A disease. For persons aged >40 years, IG is preferred; vaccine can be used if IG cannot be obtained. For healthy persons aged 12 months – 40 years, single antigen hepatitis A vaccine at the age-appropriate dose is preferred.

Who should get hepatitis A vaccine?

- ◆ Travelers visiting countries where hepatitis A is common. This includes all countries except the United States, Canada, western Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.
- ◆ People with chronic liver disease, e.g., hepatitis B and/or hepatitis C.
- ◆ People who have blood clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia.
- ◆ Men who have sex with men.
- ◆ Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs.
- ◆ People working with HAV in a research laboratory.
- ◆ All children should receive hepatitis A vaccine at 1 year of age (i.e., 12 to 23 months). Vaccination should be completed according to the licensed schedules along with other childhood vaccinations. Children who are not vaccinated by 2 years of age can be vaccinated at subsequent visits.
- ◆ Catch-up vaccination programs for unvaccinated children 2 to 18 years of age are being considered in some areas, particularly those with increasing incidence or ongoing hepatitis A outbreaks among children or adolescents. Check with your doctor or local health department to determine if you live in such an area.

Vaccine Safety

Hepatitis A vaccine is very safe and effective. You cannot get hepatitis A from the vaccine. Side effects, when they occur, are minimal and may include soreness at the injection site or a headache. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that serious problems could occur after getting the vaccine. However, the potential risks associated with hepatitis A disease are much greater than the potential risks associated with the hepatitis A vaccine.

Facts About Hepatitis A for Adults

- FACT:** Hepatitis A can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.
- FACT:** You cannot get hepatitis A from the vaccine.
- FACT:** You can get hepatitis A by consuming sewage- contaminated water or ice, raw shellfish from sewage-contaminated water, and fruits, vegetables or other foods eaten uncooked that may have been contaminated during handling. Travelers outside the U.S. are at increased risk.
- FACT:** You can also get hepatitis A through close personal contact, such as household or sexual contact with an infected person
- FACT:** Before hepatitis A vaccine became available in the U.S., an estimated average of 270,000 persons were infected with HAV each year.
- FACT:** About 35% of new cases of reported hepatitis A infection were hospitalized in 2007.
- FACT:** Adults who contract hepatitis A lose an average of one month of work.
- FACT:** About 100 people die from hepatitis A in the U.S. each year.
- FACT:** Hepatitis A virus infection is found throughout the world, but is especially common in developing countries where infections most frequently are acquired during early childhood and usually are asymptomatic or mild.
- FACT:** Hepatitis A is the most common vaccine-preventable disease acquired during travel.
- FACT:** Hepatitis A is 1,000 times more common than cholera and 100 times more common than typhoid among international travelers.