

Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. People who become sick with hepatitis A usually have fever, loss of appetite, nausea and generally feel unwell. A few days later, stools may become white/pale, urine will be dark in colour and their skin and the whites of their eyes become a yellow colour - a condition called jaundice. Occasionally, people will have no symptoms at all.

How long does it take for symptoms to develop?

It can take between 15 to 50 days from exposure to the virus for symptoms of hepatitis A to develop. The average time from exposure to symptoms is 25 to 30 days.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread from person to person by the fecal-oral route. The virus is excreted in the feces of the infected person, especially the week or two before the symptoms start, and while the person has jaundice.

Hepatitis A infection can happen by eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated by the feces of people infected with hepatitis A virus. This contamination happens more often in countries where hepatitis A occurs more frequently. It also happens from eating improperly cooked shellfish. People with hepatitis A can spread the virus to others if they do not wash their hands after having a bowel movement, after changing the diapers of an infected person, or before preparing food for others. Good hand washing includes using soap and water for at least 15 seconds.

What should I do if I have been exposed to a person with Hepatitis A?

When a person one year of age or older has been in contact with the Hepatitis A virus, infection may be prevented by giving a dose of hepatitis A vaccine as soon as possible after a known exposure. A second dose should be given 6 to 12 months later to ensure long-term protection against Hepatitis A virus. In those individuals (infants under one year of age) who cannot receive the vaccine, immunoglobulin may be considered up to 14 days after exposure.

How can Hepatitis A be prevented?

The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated. The Hepatitis A vaccine is a safe and effective and given as 2 shots, 6 months apart. Both shots are needed for long-term protection. Good hand washing after using the bathroom is the best way to prevent spreading hepatitis A. This includes washing with soap and water for at least 15 seconds. People with hepatitis A should avoid preparing food for others.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns.

Source: Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Public Health Division.

For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
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