

Hepatitis A is a disease of the liver caused by hepatitis A virus. It may make you sick for a few weeks to a few months. Most recover with no lasting liver damage.

# Hepatitis A

## How is it spread?

Hepatitis A is spread by coming in contact with the hepatitis A virus. This includes:

- ◆ Contact with any person infected with the hepatitis A virus.
- ◆ Sexual contact with an infected person.
- ◆ Touching contaminated surfaces and then placing your hands near or in your mouth.
- ◆ Sharing eating utensils that have virus on them.

- ◆ Eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated by feces that contain the virus. The food and drinks most likely to be contaminated are:

- Fruits.
- Vegetables.
- Shellfish.
- Ice.
- Water.

In the United States, chlorine in the water kills hepatitis A virus. But infected food workers can still spread hepatitis A directly to food. This occurs when hands are not washed or cleaned before food is handled.

**Infected people can spread the virus to others a few weeks before they begin to feel bad.**

## Who is at risk of hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A if they have not been vaccinated. In the U.S., you are at a higher risk if you:

- ◆ Use illegal drugs, whether injected or not.
- ◆ Live with someone who has hepatitis A.
- ◆ Have bleeding problems and take clotting factors.
- ◆ Have oral-anal sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A.
- ◆ Travel to areas that have high rates of hepatitis A.

**Travel to Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or Central and South America, including Mexico, increases the risk of getting hepatitis A.**

## What are signs of hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A does not always cause people to feel bad. It may make you sick for a few weeks to a few months. Older people can get sicker when they have hepatitis A. Young children with hepatitis A usually do not show any signs. Signs of hepatitis A include:

- ◆ Yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).
- ◆ Tiredness.
- ◆ Fever.
- ◆ Nausea.
- ◆ Vomiting.
- ◆ Loss of appetite.
- ◆ Stomach pain.
- ◆ Light stools.
- ◆ Dark urine.
- ◆ Diarrhea.

## How do you know if you have hepatitis A?

The only way to know if you have hepatitis A is by a medical exam. Your health care provider can examine and test you for hepatitis A.

## How is it treated?

There are no medicines for treating hepatitis A. If you have been exposed to hepatitis A virus, tell your health care provider. They may be able to give you a protein that fights hepatitis A virus to help keep you from getting sick. Most people with hepatitis A recover without treatment in a few months. A few people will need to be hospitalized for hepatitis A.



## What can happen if you have hepatitis A for a long time?

People with hepatitis A usually improve without treatment and have no lasting liver damage. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months. A few people can be ill for as long as 6 months. Hepatitis A can sometimes cause liver failure and death. This is usually occurs in:

- ◆ People 50 years of age or older.
- ◆ People with other liver diseases, such as hepatitis B or C.

### If you have hepatitis A:

- ◆ Get plenty of rest.
- ◆ Eat healthy foods.
- ◆ Drink plenty of fluids.
- ◆ Avoid drinking any alcohol.
- ◆ Check with your health care provider before taking:
  - Medicines.
  - Supplements and herbal medicines.
  - Over-the-counter drugs.
- ◆ Clean hands often, especially after using the bathroom.



**For more on how to clean hands, see *Clean Hands* on page 119.**

- ◆ Avoid preparing food, if possible, while you are sick.
- ◆ Talk to those listed below about having hepatitis A

so they can get more information to protect themselves:

- Household contacts.
- Sexual contacts.
- Playmates/attendees at childcare centers.
- Persons sharing illegal drugs.
- Persons sharing food or drink.
- Coworkers and/or restaurant patrons where there is an infected food worker.

**If you have hepatitis A, avoid drinking alcohol.**




## How can you avoid hepatitis A?

**The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to be vaccinated.** People with certain risk factors and health problems need this vaccine. Ask your doctor if the vaccine is right for you. You cannot get hepatitis A from the vaccine. Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for:

- ◆ All children at age 1 year.
- ◆ People who use injection and non-injection illegal drugs.
- ◆ People with chronic (lifelong) liver diseases, such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C.
- ◆ People with bleeding problems who take clotting factors.
- ◆ People whose work has a risk for hepatitis A infection.
- ◆ People who live in areas with high rates of hepatitis A infection.
- ◆ Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A. These include:
  - Africa.
  - Asia.
  - Latin America.
  - South America.
  - Eastern Europe.

CDC's Travelers' Health site has information about hepatitis A and other vaccines at: [wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2012/chapter-3-infectious-diseases-related-to-travel/hepatitis-a.htm](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2012/chapter-3-infectious-diseases-related-to-travel/hepatitis-a.htm)

**Getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent hepatitis A.**

### Other ways to avoid hepatitis A:

- ◆ Boil water or drink bottled water in places where the water may not be clean.
- ◆ Eat cooked foods and fruits that you can peel. Avoid eating uncooked vegetables or fruits that could have been washed with dirty water, such as lettuce.
- ◆ Avoid eating raw or steamed shellfish such as oysters. Shellfish may live in dirty water.
- ◆ Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex.
- ◆ Clean hands often.





### What about pregnancy?

Hepatitis A vaccine does not contain live virus, so the risk to the baby is expected to be low. However, the safety of hepatitis A vaccination during pregnancy is not known. The risk of the vaccination should be weighed against the risk for hepatitis A in pregnant women. Ask your health care provider if the vaccine is right for you.

### For more on hepatitis A see:

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):**

*Hepatitis A Basics*

[www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/basics/hepatitisA-index.asp](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/basics/hepatitisA-index.asp)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**

*Hepatitis A Information for the Public*

[www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/A/](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/A/)

*Guidelines for Vaccinating Pregnant Women; Hepatitis A*

[www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/preg-guide.htm#hepa](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/preg-guide.htm#hepa)

**National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID/NIH):**

*Hepatitis A*

[www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/hepatitis/hepatitisa/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/hepatitis/hepatitisa/Pages/Default.aspx)

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office on Women's Health:**

*Viral hepatitis fact sheet*

[www.womenshealth.gov/faq/viral-hepatitis.cfm](http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/viral-hepatitis.cfm)