Hepatitis A Is a Serious Liver Disease

Vaccination can protect you!

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a serious liver disease caused by infection with the hepatitis A virus.

How is hepatitis A virus spread?

Hepatitis A virus is usually spread from getting particles of fecal material (poop) into your mouth that are too small to be seen. This can happen through household or sexual contact with an infected person or by eating hepatitis A virus-contaminated food, drinking contaminated water, or using street drugs contaminated with hepatitis A virus. Casual contact, such as in a school or work setting, does not spread hepatitis A virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A virus infection?

Infected people can have no symptoms at all or be extremely ill. Only three in ten children less than six years of age develop symptoms, while 70% of older children and adults develop symptoms.

If a person does develop symptoms, they might include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, or jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin). These symptoms can last up to 6 months. Even without symptoms, people infected with hepatitis A virus can spread the infection to others.

How serious is hepatitis A virus infection?

About 30% of people with hepatitis A virus require hospitalization. Adults who become ill often miss several weeks of work. Although deaths due to hepatitis A virus are uncommon, death can occur from overwhelming hepatitis A virus infection that causes liver failure.

How can hepatitis A virus infection be prevented?

Safe and effective vaccines to prevent hepatitis A virus infection have been available in the U.S. since 1995. Good hand washing will also help reduce the spread of hepatitis A virus. Always wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, changing a diaper, and before preparing or eating food.

Who should get hepatitis A vaccine?

The following groups of people should get vaccinated against hepatitis A virus if they haven't already been vaccinated:

- Any person who wishes to be protected from hepatitis A virus infection
- All children who are age 12 through 23 months
- All unvaccinated children age 2 through 18 years
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of street drugs (injecting and non-injecting)
- People who are homeless or in temporary housing (such as a shelter)

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- People age 6 months and older who travel or work in any area of the world except the U.S., Canada, parts of Western Europe, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia
- People who will have close personal contact with an international adoptee from a country where hepatitis A virus infection is common (all countries except the U.S., Canada, parts of Western Europe, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia) during the first 60 days after the adoptee's arrival in the U.S.
- People with chronic liver disease, including hepatitis C
- People working with hepatitis A virus in a laboratory
- People with HIV infection
- People in a healthcare setting that targets services to injection or non-injection drug users or in a group home or non-residential daycare facility for developmentally disabled persons (without regard to specific risk factor)
- People who have been exposed to hepatitis A virus in the past 2 weeks

For families considering international adoption, who should receive hepatitis A vaccine?

People who anticipate having close personal contact (such as household contact or regular babysitting) with an international adoptee from a country where hepatitis A virus infection is common (all countries except the U.S., Canada, parts of Western Europe, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia) during the first 60 days following the adoptee's arrival in the U.S. should get the vaccine. In addition to the adoptee's new parents and siblings, this group could include grandparents and other members of the extended family, caregivers, and healthcare providers. Ideally, the first dose of hepatitis A vaccine should be given to close contacts as soon as adoption is planned but no later than 2 weeks prior to the arrival of the adoptee. A second dose should be given no sooner than 6 months after the first dose.

What should I do if I think I've been exposed to hepatitis A virus?

Consult your healthcare provider or health department right away. If you've been exposed, it's important that you receive hepatitis A vaccine within 2 weeks of exposure. Some people may need immune globulin in addition to vaccine. If you do become ill with hepatitis A virus, you will need to get information from your healthcare provider on how to take care of yourself. Your household and sexual contacts might need hepatitis A vaccine so they do not get infected.

If I've been vaccinated against hepatitis B, will this protect me from hepatitis A virus?

No. Hepatitis B is caused by a different hepatitis virus so hepatitis B vaccine will not protect you from hepatitis A virus infection. However, a combination vaccine is available to protect adults against both virus infections.

Will hepatitis A vaccine protect me against hepatitis C?

No. Hepatitis C is caused by a different hepatitis virus called hepatitis C virus. There is no vaccine available to prevent hepatitis C virus infection at this time.

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How many vaccinations are needed?

Two doses of hepatitis A vaccine are needed, spaced at least 6 months apart. If your healthcare provider uses the hepatitis A/hepatitis B combination vaccine which is licensed for use in adults, three doses are needed to complete the series.

How effective is hepatitis A vaccine?

Nearly 100% of people with a normal immune system are protected from hepatitis A virus infection after getting the 2-dose series of vaccine. Protection is achieved 2–3 weeks after the first injection.

How long does hepatitis A vaccine protect you?

Research suggests that protection will last for at least 25 years in adults and at least 14–20 years in children. Protection from serious illness may be lifelong.

How safe is hepatitis A vaccine? Does it have any side effects?

Many studies have shown that hepatitis A vaccine is very safe. Since 1995, millions of doses have been given worldwide and in the U.S. with no reports of serious health problems linked to the vaccine. Side effects might include soreness at the injection site, headache, and tiredness. These symptoms, if they occur, last for a short time only.

How can I protect myself against hepatitis A virus when traveling?

Get vaccinated against hepatitis A virus before traveling to any area of the world except the U.S., Canada, parts of Western Europe, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. Discuss the timing of your hepatitis A vaccinations with your healthcare provider. You might also need to receive immune globulin depending on your age, health status, and the length of time before your departure.

Where can I receive these shots?

Talk to your healthcare professional or your local public health department.

Everyone needs vaccinations!

If you can’t afford vaccinations or don’t know where to get them, contact your local or state health department to find out where to go for affordable vaccines.

You can access a listing of telephone numbers for state immunization programs at www.immunize.org/coordinators.

For more information, go to www.vaccineinformation.org or www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.

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