

Hepatitis A

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Hepatitis A is a contagious viral infection that can easily affect children and adults. It is one of the most common types of hepatitis virus. Often when you hear about hepatitis A it may be linked to food related outbreaks at restaurants. It's true that anyone can get hepatitis A from contaminated food or water, but hepatitis A is spread most commonly from other people who don't know they have it. Children are especially good at unknowingly spreading the infection. Before the hepatitis A vaccine was available, infections were common among parents of healthy looking infected children.

Symptoms of Hepatitis A Infection

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. Symptoms can include fever, tiredness, poor appetite, vomiting, stomach pain, and sometimes jaundice (when skin and eyes turn yellow). An infected person may have no symptoms, may have mild illness for a week or two, may have severe illness for several months, or may rarely develop liver failure and die from the infection.

Children younger than 6 years old who are infected with the hepatitis A virus usually do not have symptoms. However, they can still infect other children, and adults, who are likely to become ill. Older children and adolescents who are infected with hepatitis A show symptoms and can feel very sick, sometimes for 6 months. Unlike younger children, about 95% of adults who become infected with hepatitis A show symptoms of the illness. Adults may be out of work for a month or longer.

How Hepatitis A Spreads

Hepatitis A virus is found in large quantities in the feces (or stool) of an infected person. Hepatitis A is spread by contact with people who are infected or through contact with contaminated objects, food, water, or drinks. These are the usual ways people are infected when they travel internationally to countries with high rates of hepatitis A. In the United States, the virus can be easily spread when parents or caregivers of an infected child do not thoroughly wash their hands after changing a diaper, or when infected restaurant employees do not wash their hands well enough.

People who are infected with hepatitis A can spread the virus to others for 3 weeks or longer, whether or not they are showing symptoms of illness. Dr. Trudy Murphy from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains, "The hepatitis A virus can spread very easily.

Even a tiny amount of hepatitis A virus can be transferred from a surface, such as a diaper changing pad, onto the hands and then, into food, during preparation."

Hepatitis A Can be Serious

Before the hepatitis A vaccine was available, state health departments reported approximately 20,000 to 35,000 people with hepatitis A nationwide each year. Many more infections occurred in children younger than 15 years of age who did not show symptoms. Since only infections with symptoms are reported, and most infected children have no symptoms, the actual number of hepatitis A virus infections was estimated to be about 10 times higher – about 250,000 to 350,000 infections annually.

Hepatitis A remains a concern even though the number of reported cases has decreased significantly since the vaccine was introduced. In the United States, approximately 1,670 cases were reported to CDC from state health departments in 2010, and about 17,000 new cases were estimated to have occurred nationwide. About 1 out of 5 people with hepatitis A is hospitalized, and approximately 100 people die each year from hepatitis A. There is no medication to cure the infection or lessen the severity of the illness.

Even though most young children who get hepatitis A have no symptoms, infected children are very contagious and commonly spread the hepatitis A virus to their family members, caregivers, or other adults who have close contact with them.



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According to Dr. Doug Campos-Outcalt from the American Academy of Family Physicians, “Most children younger than 6 years do not show symptoms of hepatitis A. If illness does occur, the symptoms can last up to 2 months, but children do not usually have jaundice. We do know that infected children spread the hepatitis A virus to the adults around them, and this can be serious. When adults are infected with hepatitis A, their symptoms can be much worse, sometimes requiring hospitalization.”

The Hepatitis A Vaccine — A Safe and Effective Way to Protect Your Child

According to Dr. Murphy, “Vaccinating all children is the most effective way to prevent them from spreading the infection to their family and others. The vaccine also protects children as they grow older, when the illness can be more severe.”

For the best protection, children and adults need two doses of the hepatitis A vaccine spaced 6 months apart. The first vaccine dose is recommended at age 12 months. The hepatitis A vaccine is very effective — nearly all of children and adults who receive both doses of the vaccine will be protected from hepatitis A.

“Rates of hepatitis A in the United States have decreased by 80% since we started vaccinating for this disease. This is a real testament to how effective this vaccine is,” says Dr. Campos-Outcalt.

The hepatitis A vaccine has an excellent safety record. This vaccine is not known to cause serious side effects. About 1 out of 6 children feels soreness after receiving the shot. About 1 out of 10 children may have a mild fever or poor appetite. If these problems occur, they usually last a day or two. However, vaccines like any medicine, could very rarely cause a severe allergic reaction.

Benefits of Hepatitis A Vaccine

Getting a vaccine to protect against hepatitis A as recommended —

- Reduces illness now and in the future as children grow up.
- Prevents hospitalizations among older children and adults.
- Protects the community.

Risks of Hepatitis A Vaccine

- Mild side effects are redness or soreness at the site of the injection, fever, loss of appetite, or headache.
- Allergic reaction is extremely rare.

Selected References:

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend vaccines.

800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines>