

Hepatitis A



What is Hepatitis A?

Did you know that you can get hepatitis from eating contaminated food or drinking tainted beverages? Hepatitis A is a liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis A virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Symptoms include jaundice (a yellowing of the skin or eyes), fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, and joint pain. Some infected people have no symptoms.

How common is Hepatitis A?

The CDC estimates that there are approximately 25,000 new Hepatitis A virus cases each year. However, the official number of reported Hepatitis A cases is much lower since many infected people never have symptoms and are therefore not diagnosed. These cases are never reported to public health officials. In 2011, there were 8 cases of Hepatitis A in San Bernardino County, an incidence rate of 0.4 cases per 100,000 people. A few San Bernardino County residents were sickened in the 2013 multistate outbreak associated with contaminated berries.

How do people get infected with this germ?

Hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter (even in microscopic amounts) from contact with food, drinks, or other objects contaminated by the feces (poop) of an infected person.

Person-to-person transmission occurs when an infected individual does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom, and then touches other objects or food.

It can also occur when parents or caregivers do not properly wash their hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person. When another person touches the contaminated items or person, they can contract Hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A can be spread by eating food or drinking water or other beverages contaminated with the virus. This can include frozen or undercooked food. The food and drinks most likely to be contaminated are fruits, vegetables, shellfish, ice, and water. In the United States, chlorination of water kills Hepatitis A virus that enters the water supply.

What can be done to prevent this disease?

Follow these easy tips to prevent Hepatitis A:

- Get the Hepatitis A vaccine, especially if you are a health professional, plan to travel to a country with a high rate of Hepatitis A, or are at high risk for contracting Hepatitis A. The vaccine is recommended for all children at age 1 year.

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- Wash your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds. Make sure to wash your hands after going to the bathroom, after changing diapers, before preparing or eating foods or beverages, and after handling an animal or animal waste.
- Cook animal and poultry products thoroughly. According to the CDC, you must cook food or liquids for at least 1 minute at 185°F (85°C) to kill the virus. Freezing food will not kill the virus.
- If you are traveling to a developing country, drink only treated or boiled water, and eat only cooked hot foods or fruits you peel yourself.

How is the infection diagnosed?

Hepatitis A infection is diagnosed by taking a blood sample and testing it for the virus.

Are there long-term consequences?

Most people with Hepatitis A feel very sick for about 2 months, but some are sick for up to 6 months. Although the majority of infected people recover, about 100 people in the U.S. die each year from liver failure caused by Hepatitis A.

How can Hepatitis A be treated?

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A. Most people with Hepatitis A will feel sick for a few months before they begin to feel better. A few people will need to be hospitalized.

During this time, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids. People with Hepatitis A should check with a health professional before taking any prescription pills, supplements, or over-the-counter medications, which can potentially damage the liver. Alcohol should be avoided.

If you were recently exposed to Hepatitis A virus and have not been vaccinated against Hepatitis A, you might benefit from an injection of either immune globulin or Hepatitis A vaccine. However, the vaccine or immune globulin must be given within the first 2 weeks after exposure to be effective. A health professional can decide what is best on the basis of your age and overall health.

For more information, please contact:

County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Communicable Disease Section
www.sbcounty.gov/pubhlth
(800) 722-4794

*To report a possible foodborne illness,
contact:*

County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health Services
(800) 442-2283

Source: this information was taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website www.cdc.gov.