BOSTON PUBLIC HEALTH COMMISSION

Mayor Thomas M. Menino

Public Health Fact Sheet

Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
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Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?
Hepatitis A is a disease that causes the liver to swell. It can take from 15 to 50 days to get sick after being exposed to the hepatitis A virus. The average time is about a month.

What are the symptoms?
The symptoms depend on the person's age. Adults and teens are more likely to have fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, and jaundice. The signs of jaundice include dark brown urine and pale stool (feces). The whites of the eyes turn yellow, as can the skin of light-skinned people. Young children with hepatitis A often have mild flu-like symptoms, an upset stomach, or no symptoms at all. They seldom get jaundice. Hepatitis A symptoms generally last a week or two. Some adults can feel sick for as long as a few months, but this is rare.

How is hepatitis A spread?
The hepatitis A virus is usually found in the stools (feces) of infected people. The virus is often spread when people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper or soiled sheets, then touch their own mouths, prepare food for others, or touch others with their contaminated hands. This spreads the disease from person to person. It can also be spread by contaminated food (such as shellfish) or water. The time of highest risk for spreading the virus to others is during the two weeks before symptoms begin. Most people stop being contagious one week after their symptoms start. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A virus is usually not spread by blood.

Who gets hepatitis A?
Anyone can. People who live with or have sex with people who have the disease are at risk of catching it. Hepatitis A sometimes spreads among young children in day care. Spreading the virus among school-aged children is less common because they are more likely than infants to have symptoms (so people will know they have the virus), and most have learned to wash their hands before eating and after using the toilet.

How is it diagnosed?
A blood test looks for antibodies that fight the virus. This blood test can tell the difference between a current infection and a past one. There are also blood tests to measure how much damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.

How is hepatitis A treated?
There is no treatment for the disease, and most people do not need any. Problems such as retaining fluid and blood abnormalities are rare, but they can be treated. A person who recovers from hepatitis A will likely have immunity and therefore will not get hepatitis A again. They still may be able to get other hepatitis viruses such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

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How can you prevent hepatitis A?

- **Wash your hands**
  Good handwashing protects you against hepatitis A and many other diseases. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching food or eating and after using the toilet or changing a diaper.

- **Cook shellfish.**
  Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish. Thorough cooking destroys the hepatitis A virus.

- **Get hepatitis A vaccine if:**

– You plan to travel to or work in a country with high rates of hepatitis A (Mexico; all Central and South American countries; all African, Caribbean and Asian countries except Japan; and the countries of southern and eastern Europe).
– You live in a community with high rates of hepatitis A (Native American reservations, Alaskan Native villages, Pacific Islander villages, and some Hispanic and religious communities).
– You have chronic liver disease.
– You have a bleeding disorder and get clotting factors.
– You use street drugs of any kind.
– You are a man who has sex with other men.

What if you have been exposed to hepatitis A?

- If you have never had the hepatitis A vaccine and have been exposed, you may be able to prevent infection by having a hepatitis A vaccine or immuglobulin (IG) within 2 weeks.
- Talk with your healthcare provider right away if you have been exposed to hepatitis A, especially if; you ate at a restaurant that reports a hepatitis A outbreak, someone close to you, such as someone you live with or someone who is your caregiver, is diagnosed with hepatitis A, you recently had sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A, or you recently shared self-injected drugs with someone who has hepatitis A.

Are there any health regulations for people with hepatitis A?

Because hepatitis A can easily be spread to other people, doctors are required by law to report cases of it. To protect the public, workers who have hepatitis A cannot work in any food business until their fevers are completely gone and a week has passed since their symptoms started. The term "food business" includes restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, dairy or food-processing plants, and any other place where workers handle food or drinks, give oral care (such as brushing people's teeth), or dispense medicines.

For more information contact
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