



## Hepatitis A

### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by a germ (virus) that causes the liver to swell. It can be a mild illness that lasts a few weeks or a more severe illness that lasts several months.

### What are the symptoms?

Some people will have no symptoms. If symptoms appear, they develop 2 to 6 weeks after exposure to the virus and can include:

- Whites of the eye and skin turn yellow
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Tiredness
- Dark brown urine
- Joint pain
- Stomach pain
- Grey-colored stools (feces)
- Mild flu like symptoms

### How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually found in the stools (feces) of infected people, and people can get infected when stool gets in their mouth. This can happen when people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper or sheets soiled with stool and then touch their own mouths or prepare food for others. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A is not usually spread by blood.

### Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone who is not immune to hepatitis A can get hepatitis A infection. Certain groups of people do have a higher risk of developing hepatitis A infection:

- People experiencing homelessness
- People with substance use disorder (injection and non-injection)
- People who may come in direct contact with someone who is infected
- Men who have sex with men
- People traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common
- People who eat raw or undercooked shellfish
- People recently incarcerated

### How is it diagnosed?

A blood test is needed to see if someone has hepatitis A. This blood test can tell the difference between a current and past infection.

### How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no treatment for the disease, but rest, drinking plenty of fluids and good nutrition can help people to feel better. A person usually only gets hepatitis A once, but they can still get other hepatitis viruses such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

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## How can you prevent hepatitis A?

- **Always wash your hands well with soap and water for 20 seconds after using the toilet, touching soiled items and before and after preparing food.**
- **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 are experiencing homelessness.
  - You have a lifelong liver disease.
  - You have a bleeding disorder and get clotting factor.
  - You use illicit drugs of any kind.
  - You are a man who has sex with other men.
  - You come in direct contact with someone who is infected.
  - Many children are now given hepatitis A vaccine as part of their regular childhood vaccinations.
- **Cook shellfish.**  
Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish. Thorough cooking destroys the hepatitis A virus.

### 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 getting Immunoglobulin (IG) or hepatitis A vaccine. Contact your healthcare provider right away if you have been exposed to hepatitis A.

### Are there any health guidelines for people with hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A can easily be spread to other people so healthcare providers in Massachusetts are required by law to report hepatitis A cases to the local health department. People with hepatitis A are most contagious from two weeks before until one week after their symptoms start. To protect the public, people who are food handlers are restricted from work for 28 days after their exposure unless they have received prompt preventive treatment. A foodhandler is anyone who handles food or drinks, gives oral care, or dispenses medications.

