

HEPATITIS A FACT SHEET

Infectious Hepatitis

The cause

Hepatitis A is a viral infection that can be transmitted through the ingestion of contaminated food (most common in the US), contaminated water or through close physical contact with someone who has the disease. Since the clinical characteristics are the same for all types of acute viral hepatitis, the diagnosis must be confirmed by a blood test.

Incubation period (*time between exposure and the development of symptoms*)

From 15-50 days with an average of 4 weeks.

Period of communicability

Infected persons are most likely to transmit the virus 1-2 weeks before the onset of illness. The risk of transmission then decreases and is minimal the week after the onset of jaundice.

Symptoms

When symptoms are present, they usually occur abruptly and can include fatigue, fever, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, clay-colored stools or joint pain. As the infection progresses, the urine may become dark and the skin, including the whites of the eyes, becomes yellow (jaundiced). Complete recovery without after-effects or recurrences is expected in most cases

Diagnosis

History of known exposure plus the above symptoms are suggestive. A specific blood test for infectious hepatitis will confirm diagnosis.

Treatment

This varies with the severity of the illness but usually includes rest and a well-balanced diet. Avoid alcohol and other drugs (including over-the-counter medications) unless recommended by your clinician. Rarely, hospitalization is advised for symptoms that are severe, when the course of illness is prolonged, or if the ability to eat properly is impaired.

Prevention and control measures

Hepatitis A vaccination is the most effective way to prevent infection. Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for children at age 1, international travelers to areas with high and intermediate levels of the disease (most countries except the U.S Canada, western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan), men who have sex with men, persons who use illegal drugs, persons with chronic liver disease, clotting disease disorders, HIV infection, those persons with occupational exposure to Hepatitis A and those persons who have close contact with an international adoptee (from a country where Hepatitis A is prevalent) during the first 60 days after arrival in the U.S.
For persons and close personal contacts (household, sexual contacts and persons who have shared illicit drugs) who have recently been exposed to a confirmed case of Hepatitis A, practicing proper hand washing after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before food preparation is very important to control the spread of infection. In previously unvaccinated healthy persons 1-40 years, a single dose of Hepatitis A vaccine may be recommended and if so, should be administered as soon as possible but within 2 weeks after exposure. In persons over 40 years, immune globulin (IG) is preferred although HAV

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vaccine may be given if IG is unavailable. Persons who have had one dose of Hepatitis A vaccine at least one month prior to exposure do not need immune globulin.

Hepatitis A vaccine is usually given in 2 doses. The first dose provides immunity for at least a year. A second dose is given 6-12 months after the first and provides immunity for 20 or more years.

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