

HEPATITIS A

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Updated 1/1/07

Hepatitis A (HAV) is an acute infectious disease of the liver caused by the hepatovirus hepatitis A virus.

HOW IS HEPATITIS A TRANSMITTED?

- Person-to-person transmission through the fecal-oral route (i.e., ingestion of something that has been contaminated with the feces of an infected person) is the primary means of hepatitis A virus transmission in the United States. Most infections result from close personal contact with an infected household member or sex partner.
- Common-source outbreaks and sporadic cases also can occur from exposure to fecally contaminated food or water. Uncooked HAV-contaminated foods have been recognized as a source of outbreaks. Cooked foods also can transmit HAV if the temperature during food preparation is inadequate to kill the virus or if food is contaminated after cooking, as occurs in outbreaks associated with infected food handlers. Waterborne outbreaks are infrequent in developed countries with well-maintained sanitation and water supplies.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS A VIRUS INFECTION?

Some persons, particularly young children, show NO symptoms. When symptoms are present, they usually occur abruptly and can include the following:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Abdominal discomfort
- Dark urine
- Jaundice

WHO IS AT INCREASED RISK FOR ACQUIRING HEPATITIS A VIRUS INFECTION?

- Travelers to countries with high or intermediate endemicity of hepatitis A virus infection
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs
- Persons with clotting factor disorders
- Persons working with nonhuman primates susceptible to hepatitis A virus infection

WHEN SYMPTOMS OCCUR, HOW LONG DO THEY USUALLY LAST?

Symptoms usually last less than 2 months, although 10%–15% of symptomatic persons have prolonged or relapsing disease for up to 6 months.

WHAT IS THE INCUBATION PERIOD FOR HEPATITIS A?

The average incubation period for hepatitis A is 28 days (range: 15–50 days).

HOW LONG DOES HEPATITIS A VIRUS SURVIVE OUTSIDE THE BODY? HOW CAN THE VIRUS BE KILLED?

Hepatitis A virus can live outside the body for months, depending on the environmental conditions. The virus is killed by heating to 185 degrees F (85 degrees C) for one minute. However, the virus can still be spread from cooked food if it is contaminated after cooking. Adequate chlorination of water, as recommended in the United States, kills hepatitis A virus that enters the water supply.

CAN HEPATITIS A BECOME CHRONIC?

No, Hepatitis A does not become chronic.

CAN PERSONS BECOME REINFECTED WITH HEPATITIS A VIRUS AFTER RECOVERING FROM HEPATITIS A?

No. IgG antibodies to hepatitis A virus, which appear early in the course of infection, provide lifelong protection against the disease.

HOW IS HEPATITIS A VIRUS INFECTION PREVENTED?

1. **Vaccination** with the full, two-dose series of hepatitis A vaccine is the best way to prevent hepatitis A virus infection. Hepatitis A vaccine has been licensed in the United States for use in persons 12 months of age and older. The vaccine is recommended for persons who are more likely to get hepatitis A virus infection or are more likely to get seriously ill if they do get hepatitis A.
2. **Immune globulin** is available for short-term protection (approximately 3 months) against hepatitis A, both pre- and post-exposure. Immune globulin must be administered within 2 weeks after exposure for maximum protection.
3. **Good hygiene** — including handwashing or use of hand sanitizer after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before preparing or eating food — is also integral to hepatitis A prevention, given that the virus is transmitted through the fecal-oral route.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ON HEPATITIS A?

Student Health Services

www.studenthealth.ku.edu

Main Number: (785) 864-9500

Nurse Help Line: (785) 864-9583

Kansas Department of Health and Environment

www.kdheks.gov/epi/hepatitis.htm

Phone: 877-427-7317

Centers for Disease Control

www.cdc.gov/NCIDOD/diseases/hepatitis/index.htm

1-800-CDC-INFO

WHO SHOULD BE VACCINATED ROUTINELY AGAINST HEPATITIS A?

1. All children at age 1 year (i.e., 12–23 months). Children who have not been vaccinated by age 2 can be vaccinated at subsequent visits.
2. Children and adolescents ages 2–18 who live in states or communities where routine hepatitis A vaccination has been implemented because of high disease incidence.
3. Persons traveling to or working in countries that have high or intermediate rates of hepatitis A.
4. Men who have sex with men. Hepatitis A outbreaks among men who have sex with men have been reported frequently. Recent outbreaks have occurred in urban areas in the United States, Canada, and Australia.
5. Users of illegal injection and noninjection drugs. During the past two decades, outbreaks of hepatitis A have been reported with increasing frequency among users of both injection and noninjection drugs (e.g., methamphetamine) in North America, Europe and Australia.
6. Persons who have occupational risk for infection. Persons who work with hepatitis A virus-infected primates or with hepatitis A virus in a research laboratory setting should be vaccinated.
7. Persons who have chronic liver disease.
8. Persons who have clotting-factor disorders.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE HEPATITIS A?

Call Student Health Services at (785) 864-9507 or your medical provider for an appointment right away. Tell the person making your appointment that you suspect that you might have hepatitis A.

THIS IS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURE THAT WILL HELP LIMIT THE SPREAD OF ILLNESS TO OTHERS.

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