



## **Education**

### **Hepatitis A**

#### **What is hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver. The liver becomes inflamed, tender, and swollen.

#### **How does it occur?**

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus can be spread by contact with infected bowel movements. An infected person may pass hepatitis A to others by not washing his or her hands, especially after using the bathroom. You might get the virus from:

- food handled by an infected person
- water contaminated with sewage
- shellfish taken from contaminated waters.

#### **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after you are infected with the virus. Hepatitis A is sometimes so mild that there are no obvious symptoms.

If you have symptoms, the illness usually begins with these flulike symptoms:

- loss of appetite
- fever
- general aching
- tiredness.

Smokers may lose their taste for cigarettes.

After several days you may also have these symptoms:

- nausea and vomiting
- foul breath and bitter taste in the mouth
- dark brown urine
- yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- pain just below the ribs on your right side, especially if you press on that part of your abdomen
- bowel movements that are whitish or light yellow and may be looser than normal.

#### **How is it diagnosed?**

Your health care provider will ask about your medical history and symptoms. Your provider will examine your skin and eyes for signs of hepatitis. Your provider will check your abdomen to see if the liver is enlarged or tender.

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You will have blood tests. If blood tests show that your liver is not working normally, your provider will do tests to find out if a virus is causing the problems. Tests that find a virus will also determine the type of virus. (Several types of viruses can cause hepatitis.)

### **How is it treated?**

The usual treatment is rest. In addition, your health care provider will recommend that you avoid alcohol for at least 6 months. You will not have to stay in the hospital unless you have a very serious case.

Antibiotics are not useful in treating hepatitis A.

### **How long will the effects last?**

Recovery from hepatitis A usually takes 4 to 8 weeks. The disease rarely has lasting effects such as permanent liver damage.

Hepatitis that lasts more than 6 months usually isn't caused by hepatitis A infection.

### **How can I take care of myself?**

- Follow your health care provider's instructions for taking medicine to relieve your symptoms. When you have hepatitis, you need to avoid taking certain medicines (for example, acetaminophen). Ask your health care provider which medicines you can safely take for your symptoms (such as itching and nausea).
- Follow your provider's advice for how much rest you need and when you can return to your normal activities, including work or school. As your symptoms improve, you may gradually increase your level of activity. It is best to avoid too much physical exertion until your provider tells you it's OK.
- Eat small, high-protein, high-calorie meals, even when you feel nauseated. Sipping soft drinks or juices and sucking on hard candy may help you feel less nauseated.
- Do not drink alcohol until your health care provider says it is safe.

### **What can be done to help prevent hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A can be spread only by people with active infections. It is usually contagious for 2 to 3 weeks before symptoms appear and for 2 to 3 weeks afterward. During this time, others can pick up the virus by touching anything contaminated with bowel movements of the infected person.

You can get shots that prevent hepatitis A. Two shots are given 6 months apart. Health care providers usually recommend that you get the shots if:

- You travel or work in a developing country.
- You live in an area that has outbreaks of hepatitis A.
- You are a man who has sex with other men.
- You inject illegal drugs.
- You have chronic liver disease.
- You receive clotting factor concentrates because you have a clotting disorder, such as hemophilia.

If you are planning travel to an area where hepatitis A is common, you should have the first shot at least 6 months before you start your travels so that there is time for the second shot before you leave. If you have less than 6 months before your departure, get at least 1 shot of the vaccine at least 2 weeks before you leave. This vaccine protects against hepatitis A for many years.

An injection of immune (gamma) globulin is usually given right after you have been exposed to contaminated food or have had contact with an infected person. Immune globulin may not always prevent hepatitis A, but it may make it milder. The protection begins almost immediately but it lasts for just 2 to 4 months.

If you have hepatitis A, always wash your hands thoroughly after using the restroom. This will help prevent spread of the disease to others.

If someone in your household has hepatitis, take the following precautions:

- Ask your health care provider if you need to get a hepatitis or gamma globulin shot.
  - Wear disposable gloves if you must have contact with the sick person's bowel movements or body fluids.
  - Wash the infected person's clothing and bed linens separately from other laundry. Use very hot water and a
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- strong detergent.
- Clean contaminated toilets and other bathroom surfaces with a disinfectant. Wear gloves when you clean. If possible, it's safest to have the infected person use a different bathroom from everyone else in the household.

For more information, call or write:

American Liver Foundation Phone: 800-GOLIVER (465-4837) Web site: <http://www.liverfoundation.org> Printed information about liver disease and hepatitis, information specialists

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