

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH



HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by certain viruses and other factors, such as alcohol abuse, some medications and trauma. Its various forms affect millions of Americans. Although many cases of hepatitis are not a serious threat to health, infection with certain hepatitis viruses can become chronic (long-lasting) and can sometimes lead to liver failure and death.

How many kinds of viral hepatitis are there?

There are four major types of hepatitis, all caused by different viruses: hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C and delta hepatitis. This “HealthBeat” focuses on hepatitis A.

What is hepatitis A and how is it transmitted?

Hepatitis A, formerly known as infectious hepatitis, is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body and is passed in the stool. It can be carried on the hands of an infected person who does not wash his or her hands thoroughly after using the toilet. The infection can be spread by direct contact with the hepatitis A virus or when another person consumes food or drink handled by an infected person who does not practice good hygiene, such as handwashing. In some cases, it can be spread to persons who ingest sewage-contaminated water.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A include fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. Urine may become darker. Jaundice may then appear. Symptoms can appear from 15 to 50 days after exposure, but usually within 28 to 30 days of being exposed to the virus.

The disease is rarely fatal, and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. Infants and young children tend to have very mild or no symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone infected with the virus will have all of the symptoms. There are no long-term effects. Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

How contagious is hepatitis A?

Casual contacts — fellow classmates or work associates, for example — are generally not at risk. Because close personal contact in classrooms or offices is unlikely and because older children and adults typically practice good hygiene, the likelihood that hepatitis A will be transmitted in these settings is reduced. However, hepatitis A can be transmitted in child day-care settings, especially if good hygiene is not practiced after changing diapers. It also is due to the close personal contact among children, who are still learning to practice proper hygiene.

The contagious period begins about two weeks before symptoms appear and continues up to one week after the onset of jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). Because of the delay in symptoms, a person can transmit the virus without realizing it.

In Illinois, the incidence of hepatitis A has declined since 1990, when 1,726 cases were recorded, to 821 cases in 1998.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent the spread of the hepatitis A virus is careful handwashing after using the toilet. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period (about two weeks before symptoms appear and up to one week after onset of jaundice).

Household members, day-care contacts or others in close personal contact with an infected person should call a doctor or their local health department to obtain a shot of immune globulin, which reduces the chances of becoming ill. In normal working and classroom situations (except day-care centers), contacts do not need to receive immune globulin.

What is the proper handwashing technique?

Wet hands with soap and warm water. Rub hands for 10 to 20 seconds, making sure you clean under fingernails. Rinse under warm water. Dry hands on a paper towel or your own clean towel. In washrooms where paper towels are available, use a paper towel to turn off the water faucet and throw the towel away.

How is hepatitis A treated?

No special medicines or antibiotics are used to treat a person once symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A?

In 1995, a hepatitis A vaccine was licensed for use in the United States. This vaccine is recommended for persons who plan to travel to countries where hepatitis A occurs frequently, those who have blood clotting disorders or chronic liver disease, men who have sex with men and illegal drug users. Current guidelines call for a two-shot series with an interval between the doses of between six and 18 months, depending on the brand of vaccine used and the age of the person receiving the vaccine. Please check with your physician.

After receiving the full series of vaccinations, a person should develop long-term immunity. Research suggests immunity could last as long as 20 years.