



**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
DIVISION OF DISEASE CONTROL**

HEPATITIS A (INFECTIOUS HEPATITIS)

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. The disease is fairly common and, in Philadelphia, has been associated with outbreaks involving homeless shelters and childcare facilities.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A; however, individuals who are at greater risk for disease include:

- men who have sex with men
- intravenous drug users
- children who attend childcare
- travelers to countries highly endemic for hepatitis A

How is hepatitis A virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the stool (feces). The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by the individual. In some cases, it can be spread by consuming water contaminated with improperly treated sewage. Sexual practices that allow oral or hand contact with stool (feces) may result in person to person transmission.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include fatigue, poor appetite, fever, and vomiting. Urine may become dark in color, and then jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. 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 symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of these symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to six weeks after exposure, but usually within three to four weeks.

For how long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about a week or so before the symptoms appear, and in most cases, ends after the first week of jaundice.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

The diagnosis is based on a positive blood test for hepatitis A antibody.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

To prevent person-to-person spread, careful handwashing after using the toilet or changing diapers is the single most important means of prevention. Avoid sexual practices that may result in hand or mouth exposure to stool (feces), such as anal sex or oral-anal contact. For close household or personal contact of a patient with acute hepatitis A, a dose of immune globulin is recommended to minimize the risk of disease. For long term protection, immunization is recommended; the hepatitis A vaccine has been available since 1995.

Who should obtain the new hepatitis A vaccine?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends hepatitis A vaccine for:

- **travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis A**
- **people living in communities with high rates of hepatitis A**
- **people in certain outbreak settings**

- **laboratory personnel who work with hepatitis A virus**
- **sexually active homosexual/bisexual men**
- **people with existing chronic liver disease**
- **injecting drug users**
- **persons with hepatitis C infections**

The hepatitis A vaccine may also be used in certain outbreak situations where ongoing transmission is occurring. Although studies of certain occupational groups (for example, food service workers, health care workers, childcare workers, sewage workers) have not shown an increased risk, such people may consider vaccination if they wish to further reduce their risk or are in communities where ongoing outbreaks are occurring.