Special Edition Health Bulletin: Hepatitis A (Hep A)

You may have heard about Hep A in the news recently.

- Hepatitis A is a serious liver disease that can make you very sick.
- There are outbreaks of Hepatitis A occurring in several states across the United States.
- Hepatitis A continues to increase in Philadelphia.
- Many of the cases in Philadelphia do not have clear risk factors.
- The best way to prevent Hepatitis A infection is to get vaccinated.

What is Hep A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the Hepatitis A virus. It can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Although rare, Hepatitis A can cause death in some people. Hepatitis A is usually a short-term infection and does not become permanent.

How does Hep A spread?

Germs from poop (even in small amounts you can’t see)
Sharing needles or drugs
Sex with someone who has Hep A
Contaminated food

Food, including frozen and uncooked or undercooked food, can be contaminated with Hepatitis A.

Although uncommon, Hep A outbreaks have occurred in the United States from people eating contaminated fresh and frozen imported food products. High temperatures, such as boiling or cooking food or liquids for at least 1 minute at 185°F (85°C), kill the virus, although freezing temperatures do not.

How do I protect myself?

Get the Hepatitis A shot (vaccine) at a hospital or clinic
Wash your hands with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer, after going to the bathroom
Use condoms

Hep A vaccination is recommended for:

- All children at age 1 year
- Travelers to countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Men who have sex with other men
- People who use or inject drugs
- People who are homeless
- People with liver disease
- People with clotting-factor diseases
- People with direct contact with others who have Hepatitis A
- Any person wishing to obtain protection


Call the Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6740 for additional information.
What are the symptoms of Hep A?

Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after infection and can include:

- Extreme tiredness and fever
- Loss of appetite
- Stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea
- Gray stools
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)

Symptoms are more likely to occur in adults than in children. They usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.

To treat the symptoms of Hepatitis A, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids. Some people will need medical care in a hospital.

How serious is Hep A?

Most people who get Hepatitis A feel sick for several weeks, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. In rare cases, Hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death; this is more common in people older than 50 and in people with other liver diseases.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed?

If you have any questions about potential exposure to Hepatitis A, contact your health provider. If you were recently exposed to Hepatitis A virus and have not been vaccinated against Hepatitis A, you might benefit from an injection of either Hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin. However, the vaccine or immune globulin are only effective if given within the first 2 weeks after exposure. A health professional can decide what is best based on your age and overall health.

How is Hep A diagnosed?

A doctor can determine if you have Hepatitis A by discussing your symptoms and taking a blood sample.

Need testing, treatment, or vaccination? Contact your healthcare provider

If you don’t have insurance, contact a city health center: https://www.phila.gov/services/mental-physical-health/city-health-centers/

To find a pharmacy near you that offers Hep A vaccine, follow this link: https://www.phila.gov/services/mental-physical-health/get-vaccinated/get-vaccinated-if-you-have-health-insurance/