

Hepatitis A Virus (HAV)

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a serious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). HAV is found in the stool of an infected person.

Who gets Hepatitis A?

Everyone is susceptible to HAV, the virus that causes a hepatitis A infection, unless they have had the illness in the past or have been vaccinated against it. Some people are especially susceptible, including those who:

- Travel to or live in countries where HAV is common
- Use illegal drugs, whether injected or not
- Have clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia
- Live with someone who has HAV
- Have sexual contact with someone who has HAV including men who have sex with men

How is HAV spread?

HAV is usually spread by close personal contact with a person who is infected with HAV and/or by eating food or drinking water containing HAV. A person who has the infection can easily pass the disease to others in the same household.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis A infection?

Hepatitis A can cause a wide variety of symptoms ranging from fever, fatigue, and nausea and vomiting to more serious problems, such as yellowing of the eyes or skin (jaundice), severe stomach pains, and diarrhea that may require hospital admission. Some people get a HAV infection and have no symptoms of the disease.

How soon after an infection do the symptoms appear?

If symptoms occur, they will begin anywhere from two to six weeks after exposure, commonly around 28 days (four weeks) later. Symptoms usually develop over a period of several days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread HAV?

A person can transmit the virus to others up to two weeks before symptoms appear and for about one week after the onset of jaundice.

Does having the infection make a person immune?

Yes, prior infection with HAV makes a person immune to later infection.

What are the complications associated with HAV infection?

In rare instances, a HAV infection can result in liver failure and death.

What is the treatment for HAV?

No specific treatment exists for HAV. Your body will clear HAV on its own. HAV treatment is supportive and mainly focuses on coping with your signs and symptoms.

Are there vaccines to prevent HAV infection?

There are safe and effective vaccines against HAV. One type is given as two shots, six months apart. The vaccine also comes in a combination form, containing both hepatitis A and B vaccine, that can be given to persons 18 years of age and older. This vaccine is given as three shots, over a period of six months.

Are the Hepatitis A vaccines effective?

Yes, the hepatitis A vaccines are highly effective in preventing HAV infection. Protection begins approximately 2 to 4 weeks after the first injection. The second dose results in long-term protection.

What can be done to prevent the spread of the infection?

The best way to avoid infection with HAV is by vaccination with the Hepatitis A vaccine. Hepatitis A vaccine can be used to prevent infection, preferably within two weeks of last exposure to the Hepatitis A virus, in those individuals from 1-40 years old. Due to the risk of severe infection, those less than one year or over 40 years of age are preferably protected from a known exposure through an injection of immune globulin (IG); but vaccine can also be used if IG is not available. If IG is used, protection is immediate but lasts only about three months, so vaccination is often given along with IG.

