

# Hepatitis A

## What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a short-term liver disease. It is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the U.S. In children, hepatitis A is usually mild, but adults who have hepatitis A may be ill enough to miss a few weeks of work. Hepatitis A is rarely fatal.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The first symptoms are usually loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, tiredness, diarrhea or constipation, fever, and abdominal pain. After a few days, people with hepatitis A may have dark (brown or “tea-colored”) urine, greyish (“clay colored”) bowel movements, and/or jaundice (skin and whites of the eyes become yellow). People with hepatitis A usually feel better in one to two weeks, but it may take a few more weeks to fully recover.

## How is hepatitis A virus spread?

Hepatitis A virus is spread from person to person when germs from feces of a person with hepatitis A are swallowed. When germs are spread this way, it is called the “fecal-oral” route. Poor personal hygiene after using the restroom or changing diapers can leave feces with hepatitis A on a person’s hands. The virus can then be easily spread onto foods or objects that are placed in the mouths of other people.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

It usually takes about two to 7 weeks before a person becomes sick with hepatitis A. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months, but people can be sick for up to 6 months.

## How long can an infected person spread the virus?

An infected person can spread the virus up to two weeks before the symptoms begin, and for about two weeks after symptoms of dark urine, jaundice, or greyish stools occur.

## Who is at risk of getting hepatitis A?

Those at greatest risk of getting hepatitis A are household members, close friends/contacts, and sexual contacts of a person with hepatitis A. People at school, work, or who have casual contact with an infected person are at low risk of getting the disease. People who have had hepatitis A before, or who have been vaccinated, cannot get it. International travelers are also at increased risk for Hepatitis A.

## What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no treatment for hepatitis A other than bed rest, drinking a lot of water, and eating a healthy diet. Since hepatitis A affects the liver, people with this disease should not drink alcohol or take any drugs (including aspirin and acetaminophen [Tylenol®]) without first asking their doctor.

## What can be done to protect a person who has been exposed to hepatitis A?

Post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is recommended to prevent illness for all household members and close (including sexual) contacts of a person with hepatitis A. PEP must be given within two weeks after the last direct contact with a person with hepatitis A. The two types of PEP are the hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG). The hepatitis A vaccine is given to people between the ages of 12 months - 40 years, and IG is given to people outside that age range, and to people with certain health conditions. IG gives short-term protection, so people who receive IG can also get the hepatitis A vaccine for long-term protection.

## How can hepatitis A be prevented?

For long-term protection, the hepatitis A vaccine is best. To prevent person-to-person spread, careful hand washing after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food, is the single most important way to prevent spread of hepatitis A and other diseases.