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Patient information: Hepatitis A (Beyond the Basics)

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HEPATITIS A OVERVIEW

Hepatitis is a common form of liver injury that simply means "inflammation of the liver" (the suffix "itis" means inflammation and "hepa" means liver). Hepatitis A is a specific type of hepatitis that is caused by a virus.

Hepatitis A virus (HAV) infection occurs worldwide. The number of people who become infected with HAV in the United States has declined substantially since a vaccine became available; the vaccine is routinely recommended for all infants and any adult who is at high risk of becoming infected. In 2005, 1.5 people per 100,000 were infected with HAV; this is the lowest infection rate ever recorded [1].

However, the infection rate is much higher in developing countries. Among travelers to developing countries, about three in every 1,000 travelers staying in luxury hotels acquire hepatitis A every month, and about 20 in every 1,000 travelers who eat or drink in poor hygienic conditions acquire hepatitis A every month.

This topic review discusses how hepatitis A is spread, the signs and symptoms of HAV infection, how it is diagnosed and treated, and how it can be prevented. Other types of hepatitis are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Hepatitis B \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)" and "[Patient information: Hepatitis C \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

HOW DID I BECOME INFECTED WITH HEPATITIS A?

The hepatitis A virus is carried in the stool of infected people. The most common way for the virus to be spread is when an infected person does not wash their hands after using the bathroom and then touches food, a surface, or another person's mouth.

Hepatitis A virus is more common in areas that lack adequate sanitation or have poor hygiene practices. The majority of people who acquire the illness have had personal contact with an infected person.

Community outbreaks have occurred as a result of drinking contaminated well water or eating contaminated food. In one report, hepatitis A virus was detected in well water six months after the initial contamination [2]. Hepatitis A virus can be acquired from contaminated food, usually raw shellfish that is harvested from contaminated water. Several outbreaks occurred as a result of eating contaminated green onions, which were imported from Mexico [3].

HEPATITIS A SYMPTOMS

Hepatitis A virus usually causes a sudden and short-lived illness. The severity of symptoms depends upon the person's age; in children, there may be few or no symptoms. In adults, infection usually causes a mild flu-like illness. Less commonly in adults, hepatitis A virus infection causes liver failure, which can lead to death.

The time from infection to the development of symptoms is approximately 30 days, with a range of 15 to 49 days. Initial symptoms usually include fatigue, feeling run down, nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, fever (temperature greater than 100.4° F or 38° C), and pain under the ribs on the right side of the abdomen (where the liver is located) ([figure 1](#)). As the illness progresses, other signs and symptoms develop, including dark-colored urine, light colored stools, yellow colored skin or whites of the eyes (jaundice), and itchy skin.

HEPATITIS A DIAGNOSIS

A person is diagnosed with hepatitis A virus based upon their signs or symptoms, a physical examination, and blood testing. The blood test becomes positive about 5 days before symptoms appear and remains positive for about six months after infection.

HEPATITIS A TREATMENT

There is no cure for hepatitis A virus, although most people recover with supportive treatments at home, including rest. The amount of time needed to recover depends upon the individual; in general, the person should not return to work or school until the fever and jaundice have resolved and the appetite has returned.

During the recovery period, it is important to avoid drinking alcohol and taking certain prescription and over-the-counter medications (eg, acetaminophen/Tylenol®), which can injure the liver. People who drink alcohol on a regular basis (eg, seven to 14 drinks per week) should never take acetaminophen, even if they have not been infected with hepatitis, due to the risk of liver injury.

Less commonly, people infected with hepatitis A virus require treatment in a hospital to monitor the liver function, manage complications such as bleeding, provide adequate nutrition, and in rare cases, perform liver transplantation.

HEPATITIS A COMPLICATIONS

Most people feel better within three months of becoming infected with hepatitis A virus, and almost everyone completely recovers within six months. About 15 percent of people infected with hepatitis A virus will have prolonged or relapsing symptoms during the first six to nine months after being infected.

The most serious complication of hepatitis A virus infection is death. This occurs rarely, but is more likely in adults with chronic liver infections such as hepatitis C and those who are elderly. Children die as a result of hepatitis A virus in less than 0.1 percent of cases. (See "[Patient information: Hepatitis C \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

Unlike with other forms of hepatitis, people with hepatitis A do not develop chronic liver disease as a result of their infection. Once a person is infected with hepatitis A virus, it is not possible to become infected again.

