



Hepatitis A in a Foodhandler Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a virus that causes liver disease. In children it is usually mild, but many adults who develop hepatitis A are ill enough to miss about 4 to 6 weeks of work.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Fever, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, tiredness, occasionally diarrhea and a general feeling of being ill are usually the first symptoms. These symptoms may be followed in a few days by dark (“tea-colored”) urine and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Infected persons usually feel better after 1-2 weeks, although they may continue to feel tired for a few more weeks.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The first symptoms usually appear after about 1 month, but can develop anytime between 2 to 6 weeks after infection.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus is found in the feces (stool) of infected persons. For illness to occur, the hepatitis A virus must enter the mouth of susceptible individuals. Foods may be contaminated when infected foodhandlers, who do

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not wash their hands carefully, directly touch foods that are eaten uncooked or food after it has been cooked.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

An infected person can spread the virus for 1-2 weeks before symptoms appear and for about 1 week after jaundice occurs.

Can a person get hepatitis A again?

After an infection with hepatitis A, a person cannot get it again. There are, however, different kinds of hepatitis; infection with hepatitis A will not protect a person from getting other types of hepatitis.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

Once a person is ill, there are no special medicines that will help. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Since hepatitis is an illness of the liver, infected persons should avoid drinking alcohol or taking drugs or medicines (including aspirin and Tylenol®) without first asking their doctor.

What can be done after a person is exposed to a person infected with hepatitis A?

Immune globulin (Ig) (previously called “gamma globulin”) is a “shot” given to help prevent hepatitis A. Co-workers of foodhandlers infected with hepatitis A are advised to get a shot as soon as possible, but at least

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within 7 days after contact or they will not be allowed to handle food for a period of 6 weeks. Immune globulin is also recommended for all household members and close (including sexual) contacts of a person with hepatitis A. It is important to note that the Ig shot does not guarantee that hepatitis A will not occur.

How can the spread of hepatitis A be prevented?

An effective vaccine is available and is the best way to provide protection against Hepatitis A. All food service worker should consider receiving the vaccine.

The spread of hepatitis A can be prevented by always washing hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after using the toilet. It is extremely important that foodhandlers not handle food or drinks when they feel ill. Employees should notify their local county health department if they develop signs or symptoms similar to those of hepatitis A.

The proper use of gloves can help to prevent the spread of hepatitis A. A fresh pair of gloves must be worn each time after an employee uses the rest room. Gloves must be changed to a fresh pair whenever gloves have been used to touch items other than food, after touching raw (to be cooked) foods or before touching clean utensils used to directly prepare food. Gloves should always be

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replaced if a tear is noticed. Glove use is no substitute for good handwashing practices. Hands must always be washed prior to using or replacing gloves.

For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department (405) 425-4437

revised 4/2013

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