



Weill Cornell Medical College

ClinicalKey®

Patient Education:

# Hepatitis A

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**Keyword(s):** hepatitis;hep;hep a;inflamed liver;hepatitis virus;hepatitis A;poison;autoimmune disorders;alcohol;liver injury;medicines;viral infections;mononucleosis;cytomegalovirus;acute hepatitis;chronic hepatitis;nausea;vomiting;emesis;fever;body aches;bilirubin;jaundiceandliver infection

## **Learn about the symptoms of and treatments description for hepatitis A, and how to avoid getting infected.**

other-org-1- name	American Liver Foundation
other-org-1- org-web- address	<a href="http://www.liverfoundation.org">http://www.liverfoundation.org</a>

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## Overview

### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is a general term for inflammation of the liver. Normally, the liver breaks down waste products in your blood. But when the liver is inflamed, it doesn't do a good job of getting rid of waste products. This causes waste products to build up in your blood and tissues.

Many different things can cause hepatitis. The most common cause of hepatitis is infection with one of the 5 hepatitis viruses (A, B, C, D, or E). Lack of blood supply to the liver, poison, autoimmune disorders, excessive alcohol use, an injury to the liver, and taking certain medicines can also cause hepatitis. Less commonly, viral infections such as [mononucleosis](#) or [cytomegalovirus](#) can cause hepatitis.

There are 2 main kinds of hepatitis: acute hepatitis (short-lived) and chronic hepatitis (lasting at least 6 months). Most people get over the acute inflammation in a few days or a few weeks.

Sometimes, however, the inflammation doesn't go away. When the inflammation doesn't go away in 6 months, the person has chronic hepatitis.

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is liver inflammation caused by the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A is very contagious, which means that you can easily catch the virus from someone or give it to another person.

Hepatitis A is different from other types of hepatitis. It isn't typically as serious as hepatitis B or C, and it doesn't usually develop into chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis.

## Symptoms

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A virus is usually in your system for 2-6 weeks before symptoms appear. Some people never have any symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they can appear suddenly and may include the following:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Jaundice (the yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes)
- Low-grade fever (fever up to 102°F)
- Fatigue
- Pain in your abdomen, especially on your right side
- Dark-colored urine
- Loss of appetite
- Muscle pain
- Itching

Young children are likely to have very mild cases of hepatitis A, while symptoms in older children and adults are more likely to be severe.

## How long will I be contagious?

You are most contagious soon after you are infected and before symptoms appear. Adults who are otherwise healthy are no longer contagious 2 weeks after the illness begins. Children and people who have weak immune systems may be contagious for up to 6 months.

## Causes & Risk Factors

### What causes hepatitis A and how is it spread?

Hepatitis A is caused by infection with the hepatitis A virus. You get the virus when you unknowingly eat a small amount of infected feces. This can happen through person-to-person contact, or through eating or drinking contaminated food or water.

A person can have and spread hepatitis A, even if that person does not have any symptoms. In fact, hepatitis A is most contagious before symptoms appear. You are most likely to get hepatitis A from another person when:

- A person who has the virus does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom.
- A parent does not wash his or her hands properly after changing the diaper of an infected child
- A caregiver does not wash his or her hands properly after cleaning up the stool of an infected person
- You have sex with a person who has the virus.

You can also get infected by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. Contaminated food and water are more common in developing countries. When traveling in areas where hepatitis A is common, avoid eating raw fruits and vegetables, shellfish, ice, and

untreated water.

## What are the risk factors for hepatitis A?

You are at higher risk for hepatitis A if you:

- Live with or have sex with someone who has hepatitis A
- Travel to countries where hepatitis A is common
- Are a man who has sex with other men
- Use illegal drugs
- Have a clotting-factor disorder, such as hemophilia

## Diagnosis & Tests

### How will my doctor know I have hepatitis A?

See your doctor if you have any of the symptoms of hepatitis A. He or she can do a blood test to see if you have the disease.

## Treatment

### How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific medicine to treat or cure hepatitis A. If you have the virus, your body will eventually get rid of the infection on its own. You probably will feel sick for a few months before you begin to feel better.

To help your liver heal, you should get plenty of rest, eat a balanced diet and avoid alcohol and acetaminophen (one brand: Tylenol). Talk with your doctor before you take any prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, or vitamins or supplements. Alcohol, acetaminophen, and certain other medicines, vitamins, and supplements can cause more damage to your liver.

You may need to stay in the hospital for a short time if you get dehydrated, have severe pain, suddenly become confused, or develop bleeding problems.

## Prevention

### How can I keep from getting hepatitis A?

Ask your doctor about the hepatitis A vaccine. The shot is safe for anyone older than 1 year of age and can provide protection for up to 20 years.

Wash your hands with soap and warm water before and after cooking, after using the bathroom and after changing diapers.

Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating and avoid raw or undercooked meat and fish.

## Other Organizations

### Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What treatment is best for me?
- Do I need treatment?
- Should I change my diet?
- Are there any medicines I should avoid taking?
- Can I drink alcohol?
- How can I protect my family from getting hepatitis A?
- Am I at higher risk of getting other types of hepatitis?
- When should I call my doctor?

- Will I have to be hospitalized?
- Will I have permanent liver damage?

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06/15/06, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20060615/2162.html>)