



What is hepatitis A virus (HAV)?

Hepatitis A is one of many hepatitis viruses causing inflammation of the liver. In recent years about 25,000 to 30,000 Americans are infected with HAV annually. A positive blood test for hepatitis A, called the IgM hepatitis A antibody test, indicates that you are infected.

Transmission

Hepatitis A is spread most often directly from person to person:

- Fecal/oral contact, by putting something in the mouth that had been contaminated with infected feces.
- Diaper changing tables, if not cleaned properly or changed after each use, may facilitate the spread of HAV. Fecal residue may remain on the hands of people changing soiled diapers.
- Fecal contamination of food and water.
- Food handlers who are infected can pass the virus on if they do not wash their hands with soap and water after having a bowel movement especially when preparing foods that are not cooked afterwards.
- Eating raw or partially cooked shellfish (clams, oysters, or mussels) contaminated with HAV can spread the virus.

Symptoms

- Children with hepatitis A usually have no symptoms.
- Adults may become quite ill suddenly, experiencing jaundice, fatigue nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine/light stools and fever.
- The incubation period averages 30 days; however, an infected individual can transmit the virus to others as early as two weeks before symptoms appear.
- Symptoms will disappear over a 3 to 6-month period until complete recovery occurs.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. However, the infection will clear up on its own in a few weeks or months with no serious after effects. Once recovered, an individual is then immune (not infectious) and cannot contract hepatitis A again. However, their blood test will always be positive for hepatitis A antibodies of the IgG class. About 1 in 1000 with hepatitis A suffers from a sudden and severe infection (fulminant) that may require a liver transplant.

Prevention

Hepatitis A Vaccines are made from inactivated (killed) hepatitis A virus. They are highly effective in preventing the hepatitis A infection. The vaccine provides protection within two weeks after the first injection. A second injection results in long-lasting protection, possibly 25 years or longer. Twinrix, a vaccine that combines hepatitis A and B, may be given to individuals 18 years and over.

The vaccine is licensed for persons 12 months of age and older and is recommended for:

- Individuals who have chronic liver disease or clotting factor disorders.
- Those who travel or work in developing countries (this includes all countries except northern and western Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and North America, except Mexico).
- Men who have sex with other men;
- Users of illicit drugs.
- Children in populations that have repeated epidemics of hepatitis A (Alaska natives, American Indians, and certain closed religious communities) and states or counties that have consistently elevated rates of hepatitis A.
- Household contacts of individuals with acute hepatitis A

Immune globulin (IG) can provide a temporary immunity to the virus for 2 to 3 months if given prior to exposure to HAV or within 2 weeks after exposure but has largely been replaced by the HAV vaccines.