

Hepatitis A (HAV)

Hepatitis A (HAV) is a highly contagious and occasionally fatal liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. Historically, it was called infectious hepatitis. There are large nationwide outbreaks every decade. Hepatitis A rates in the United States have declined by 89% since hepatitis A vaccine first became available in 1995. In 2007, 2,979 acute symptomatic cases of hepatitis A were reported in the United States; the incidence was 1.0/100,000, the lowest rate ever recorded. After adjusting for asymptomatic infection and underreporting, the estimated number of new infections was 25,000.

About 15% of people may have a relapse of the disease and may be impaired for as long as 6 months.

Transmission

Hepatitis A is spread from person to person by fecal-oral transmission (putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A). This is the primary means of transmission in the United States. Hepatitis A can also be spread through contaminated food or water.

Once you have had hepatitis A, you cannot get it again.

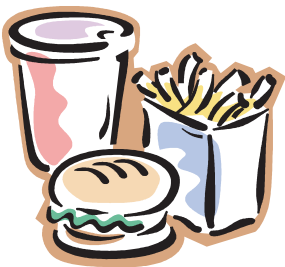
Symptoms

Some persons, particularly young children, are asymptomatic. If symptoms are present, they usually occur abruptly and may include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, dark urine, joint pain, diarrhea, abdominal discomfort and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). In children aged <6 years, 70% of infections are asymptomatic; if illness does occur, it is typically not accompanied by jaundice. Among older children and adults, infection is typically symptomatic, with jaundice occurring in >70% of patients. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months; a few persons are ill as long as 6 months. The average incubation period for hepatitis A is 28 days.

Groups at Risk

Persons at highest risk of becoming infected include

- ◆ Those travelling to (or working in) countries with increased rates of hepatitis A
- ◆ Men who have sex with men
- ◆ Injecting and non-injecting drug users
- ◆ Persons with clotting disorders
- ◆ Persons working with nonhuman primates susceptible to HAV infection
- ◆ Household contacts and sexual contacts of infected persons



Prevention

Hepatitis A vaccine is the best way to prevent infection and is available in the U.S. for use in persons 12 months of age and older. The vaccine is recommended (before exposure to hepatitis A virus) for persons who are more likely to get hepatitis A virus infection or are more likely to get seriously ill if they do get hepatitis A. The vaccine has an excellent safety profile. Protection should last for at least 20 years. Good hygiene - including handwashing or use of hand sanitizer after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food - is also integral to hepatitis A prevention, given that the virus is transmitted through the fecal-oral route.

Healthcare Workers

Healthcare workers are not at an increased risk for hepatitis A. If a patient with hepatitis A is admitted to the hospital, Standard Precautions will prevent transmission to hospital staff.

References

- ◆ <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HAV/HAVfaq.htm>

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