

# What I need to know about Hepatitis A



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE  
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

National Digestive Diseases  
Information Clearinghouse



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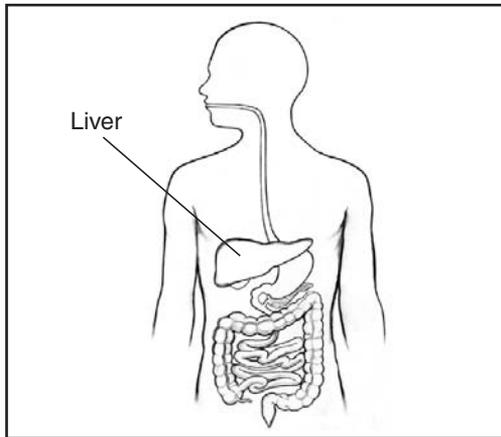
## What is hepatitis A?

**Hepatitis\*** A is a **virus**, or infection, that causes liver disease and **inflammation** of the liver. Viruses can cause sickness. For example, the flu is caused by a virus. People can pass viruses to each other.

Inflammation is swelling that occurs when tissues of the body become injured or infected. Inflammation can cause organs to not work properly.

## What is the liver?

The liver is an organ that does many important things. You cannot live without a liver.



Hepatitis A is a virus, or infection, that causes inflammation of the liver.

\*See page 12 for tips on how to say the words in **bold** type.

The liver

- removes harmful chemicals from your blood
- fights infection
- helps digest food
- stores nutrients and vitamins
- stores energy

## Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but those more likely to are people who

- travel to developing countries
- live with someone who currently has an active hepatitis A infection
- use illegal drugs, including noninjection drugs
- have unprotected sex with an infected person
- provide child care

Also, men who have sex with men are more likely to get hepatitis A.

## How could I get hepatitis A?

You could get hepatitis A through contact with an infected person's stool. This contact could occur by

- eating food made by an infected person who didn't wash his or her hands after using the bathroom
- drinking untreated water or eating food washed in untreated water
- placing a finger or object in your mouth that came into contact with an infected person's stool
- having close personal contact with an infected person, such as through sex or caring for someone who is ill

### **You cannot get hepatitis A from**

- being coughed or sneezed on by an infected person
- sitting next to an infected person
- hugging an infected person

A baby cannot get hepatitis A from breast milk.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Most people do not have any symptoms of hepatitis A. If symptoms of hepatitis A occur, they include

- feeling tired
- muscle soreness
- upset stomach
- fever
- loss of appetite
- stomach pain
- diarrhea
- dark-yellow urine
- light-colored stools
- yellowish eyes and skin, called **jaundice**

Symptoms of hepatitis A can occur 2 to 7 weeks after coming into contact with the virus. Children younger than age 6 may have no symptoms. Older children and adults often get mild, flulike symptoms. See a doctor right away if you or a child in your care has symptoms of hepatitis A.

## How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

A blood test will show if you have hepatitis A. Blood tests are done at a doctor's office or outpatient facility. A blood sample is taken using a needle inserted into a vein in your arm or hand. The blood sample is sent to a lab to test for hepatitis A.



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A blood test will show if you have hepatitis A.

## How is hepatitis A treated?

Hepatitis A usually gets better in a few weeks without treatment. However, some people can have symptoms for up to 6 months. Your doctor may suggest medicines to help relieve your symptoms. Talk with your doctor before taking prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

See your doctor regularly to make sure your body has fully recovered. If symptoms persist after 6 months, then you should see your doctor again.

When you recover, your body will have learned to fight off a future hepatitis A infection. However, you can still get other kinds of hepatitis.



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Hepatitis A usually gets better in a few weeks without treatment.

## How can I avoid getting hepatitis A?

You can avoid getting hepatitis A by receiving the hepatitis A **vaccine**.

Vaccines are medicines that keep you from getting sick. Vaccines teach the body to attack specific viruses and infections. The hepatitis A vaccine teaches your body to attack the hepatitis A virus.

The hepatitis A vaccine is given in two shots. The second shot is given 6 to 12 months after the first shot. You should get both hepatitis A vaccine shots to be fully protected.

All children should be vaccinated between 12 and 23 months of age. Discuss the hepatitis A vaccine with your child's doctor.

Adults at higher risk of getting hepatitis A and people with chronic liver disease should also be vaccinated.

If you are traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common, including Mexico, try to get both shots before you go. If you don't have time to get both shots before you travel, get the first shot as soon as possible. Most people gain some protection within 2 weeks after the first shot.

You can also protect yourself and others from hepatitis A if you

- always wash your hands with warm, soapy water after using the toilet or changing diapers and before fixing food or eating
- use bottled water for drinking, making ice cubes, and washing fruits and vegetables when you are in a developing country
- tell your doctor and your dentist if you have hepatitis A



Always wash your hands with warm, soapy water after using the toilet or changing diapers and before fixing food or eating.

## **What should I do if I think I have been in contact with the hepatitis A virus?**

See your doctor right away if you think you have been in contact with the hepatitis A virus. A dose of the hepatitis A vaccine or a medicine called hepatitis A immune globulin may protect you from getting sick if taken shortly after coming into contact with the hepatitis A virus.

## **Eating, Diet, and Nutrition**

If you have hepatitis A, you should do things to take care of yourself, including eating a healthy diet. Avoid drinking alcohol, which can harm the liver. Talk with your doctor before taking vitamins and other supplements.

## Points to Remember

- Hepatitis A is a virus, or infection, that causes inflammation of the liver.
- Anyone can get hepatitis A, but some people are more likely to than others.
- You could get hepatitis A through contact with an infected person's stool.
- Most people do not have any symptoms of hepatitis A.
- Children younger than age 6 may have no symptoms of hepatitis A.
- Hepatitis A may cause mild, flulike symptoms in older children and adults.
- See a doctor right away if you or a child in your care has symptoms of hepatitis A.
- A blood test will show if you have hepatitis A.
- Hepatitis A usually gets better in a few weeks without treatment.
- You can avoid getting hepatitis A by receiving the hepatitis A vaccine.
- Tell your doctor and your dentist if you have hepatitis A.
- See your doctor right away if you think you have been in contact with the hepatitis A virus.

## Hope through Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) supports basic and clinical research into many digestive disorders, including hepatitis A. Researchers are studying new ways to prevent hepatitis A.

Participants in clinical trials can play a more active role in their own health care, gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available, and help others by contributing to medical research. For information about current studies, visit [www.ClinicalTrials.gov](http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov).

## Pronunciation Guide

**hepatitis** (HEP-uh-TY-tiss)

**inflammation** (IN-fluh-MAY-shuhn)

**jaundice** (JAWN-diss)

**vaccine** (vak-SEEN)

**virus** (VY-ruhss)

## For More Information

### **American Liver Foundation**

39 Broadway, Suite 2700

New York, NY 10006

Phone: 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800-465-4837)  
or 212-668-1000

Fax: 212-483-8179

Email: [info@liverfoundation.org](mailto:info@liverfoundation.org)

Internet: [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)

### **Hepatitis Foundation International**

504 Blick Drive

Silver Spring, MD 20904

Phone: 1-800-891-0707 or 301-622-4200

Fax: 301-622-4702

Email: [info@hepatitisfoundation.org](mailto:info@hepatitisfoundation.org)

Internet: [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

### **National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road

Atlanta, GA 30333

Phone: 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

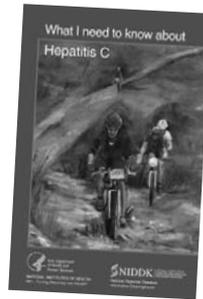
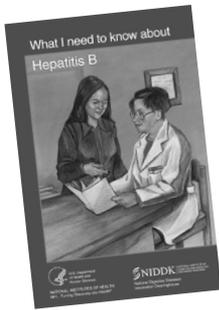
TTY: 1-888-232-6348

Email: [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

Internet: [www.cdc.gov/nchhstp](http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp)

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) also has booklets about hepatitis B and hepatitis C:

- *What I need to know about Hepatitis B*
- *What I need to know about Hepatitis C*



You can get a free copy of each booklet by calling 1-800-891-5389, by going online to [www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov), or by writing to

**NDDIC**

2 Information Way

Bethesda, MD 20892-3570

Hepatitis information for health professionals is also available.

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Internet: [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov)

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the Clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. The NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

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This publication is available at [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).

This publication may contain information about medications. When prepared, this publication included the most current information available. For updates or for questions about any medications, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration toll-free at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332) or visit [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov). Consult your health care provider for more information.



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