

Hepatitis A

Frequently Asked Questions

Revised July 29, 2016



OVERVIEW

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). The disease can range from a mild illness lasting 1 or 2 weeks to a severe illness lasting for several months. HAV is found in the stool of people with hepatitis A infection and is usually spread by eating contaminated food or drinking water and can be spread through close personal/sexual contact. A person who has hepatitis A can easily pass the disease to others within the same household.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A infection?

Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Headache and/or body ache
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Dark colored urine
- Pale colored stools
- Yellow skin and eyes (Jaundice—may develop several days to a week after other symptoms begin)

Infants and young children with hepatitis A infection tend to have milder or no symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults.

Illness usually occurs from two weeks to as long as 50 days after exposure to the hepatitis A virus (i.e., consuming the contaminated product).

Persons should seek medical attention immediately should they develop symptoms.

I have been notified that I am a contact of a case. Should I get tested or restrict my activities?

A contact of a case is defined as:

- All unvaccinated household members
- All unvaccinated sexual contacts
- Anyone sharing illicit drugs with a case
- Anyone sharing food or eating or drinking utensils with a case
- Anyone consuming ready-to-eat foods prepared by an infectious food handler

Recommendations for contacts of cases:

1. Contact your healthcare provider about the possibility of receiving hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG), which may provide some protection against the disease, if administered within two weeks after exposure
2. Monitor your health for symptoms of hepatitis A infection up to 50 days after exposure
3. Wash your hands with soap and warm water frequently and thoroughly, especially after using the bathroom and before preparing food
4. If symptoms of hepatitis A infection develop, stay at home and contact your healthcare provider immediately

Contacts of cases who are not ill may continue their regular activities (work, school, and social) without restriction.

Testing of individuals who do not have symptoms of hepatitis A is not recommended, with the exception of food handlers (persons who directly prepare, serve, or handle food) in the food service industry. Hawaii State law requires contacts of cases, if not vaccinated prior to exposure, to be tested and have a negative hepatitis A IgM test before returning to work. If you are a food handler, contact your healthcare provider to request this test or, if applicable, provide documentation to your employer of your hepatitis A vaccinations administered prior to exposure. Note: Hepatitis A vaccine or IG, if indicated, should be administered after results of the testing are received.

Who should be tested for hepatitis A infection?

Only patients who have symptoms of hepatitis A infection should be tested. See exception below.

Testing when you have no symptoms is not recommended: your test result may be negative because it is too early (given the long incubation period of hepatitis A disease)—that is, you may have a false negative result.

Exception: Unvaccinated food handlers (persons who directly prepare, serve, or handle food) who are **contacts of cases** must have a negative hepatitis A IgM test before they return to work.

How long is a person with hepatitis A contagious?

Patients with hepatitis A are most contagious during the 1 to 2 weeks before the symptoms start until at least 1 week after the start of first symptoms.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

How can I prevent hepatitis A infection?

Hepatitis A infection is a vaccine preventable disease. Fortunately, most children and some adolescents have been vaccinated as part of routine and catch-up childhood vaccination recommendations. However, many adolescents and adults have not been vaccinated and will be susceptible.

Two doses of hepatitis A vaccine are needed for lasting protection. These doses should be given at least 6 months apart. For more information about the hepatitis A vaccine, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/hep-a.pdf>.

For a list of pharmacies that provide hepatitis A vaccine, go to http://health.hawaii.gov/docd/files/2013/07/IMM_Adult_Resource_List.pdf.

If you have already been vaccinated against hepatitis A or have had hepatitis A disease in the past, you should be protected and do not require a booster for protection.

What is post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP?

Post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP refers to administering hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG) to try to prevent disease after exposure to hepatitis A virus. PEP should be administered as soon as possible, within two weeks after exposure.

Who should get PEP after being exposed to hepatitis A?

Unvaccinated contacts of cases should talk to their healthcare providers about the possibility of receiving hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG), which may provide some protection against the disease if administered within the first two weeks after exposure.

A contact is defined as:

- All unvaccinated household members
- All unvaccinated sexual contacts
- Anyone sharing illicit drugs with a case
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- Anyone consuming ready-to-eat foods prepared by an infectious food handler

Note: A food handler is any person who directly prepares, serves, or handles food.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A infection?

There is no special treatment for persons with hepatitis A infection. Most persons with hepatitis A infection will recover without complications but may require supportive therapy (e.g. fluids orally or, in some cases, given through the vein, medicines to control fever) and close monitoring by their physician. Persons should seek medical attention if they develop symptoms of hepatitis A infection.

Does hepatitis B vaccine provide any protection against hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are diseases caused by three different viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. There are vaccines to prevent hepatitis A and B; however, there is not one for hepatitis C. Vaccination with hepatitis B vaccine does not provide protection against hepatitis A disease.

OTHER INFORMATION

How long does hepatitis A virus survive outside the body?

The hepatitis A virus is extremely hardy. It is able to survive the body's highly acidic digestive tract and can live outside the body for months. High temperatures, such as boiling or cooking food or liquids for at least 1 minute at 185°F (85°C), kill the virus, although freezing temperatures do not.

What if I don't have health insurance or a healthcare provider?

For assistance, call Aloha United Way 2-1-1.

Does the Department of Health conduct food safety inspections at restaurants and other food service organizations?

Yes. Food safety inspection reports are available at the DOH Restaurant Inspection website <http://hi.healthinspections.us/hawaii/>.

For more information about hepatitis A, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Viral Hepatitis – Hepatitis A website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/afaq.htm#overview>.

Healthcare providers with questions regarding recommendations for hepatitis A prophylaxis and testing should call the Hawaii Department of Health Immunization Branch at 586-8300 (Oahu), 1-800-933-4832 (Neighbor islands).