

Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a virus that attacks the liver and causes inflammation. People seldom die of this disease but the older you are, the sicker you will feel.

What are the symptoms?

Only a blood test can confirm the presence of the virus. Early symptoms can include fever, upset stomach and loss of appetite, headache and abdominal discomfort. A few days later, the skin turns yellow indicating the presence of jaundice. Children may show no symptoms at all. Although complete recovery usually occurs, it will take a month or more for adults to recover and 25 percent require hospitalization.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread by direct contact with fecal-contaminated food and water. It can also be spread person to person. It is most common in areas of poor sanitation and is spread by poor hand-washing techniques. A person with Hepatitis A may be unaware of it and spread it to others. This virus may also be picked up by shellfish in contaminated water. Thorough cleansing and good cooking techniques are essential.

Who is at risk?

People traveling to countries where the disease is common are at greatest risk. Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East pose the highest risk but there is some risk in all remaining countries. Traveling off the beaten track increases the potential of disease as well.

How to protect yourself?

1. WASH YOUR HANDS!

Washing with soap and water after toileting and before preparing meals provides the best defense against hepatitis A and many other diseases.

2. Hepatitis A Vaccine:

There are several excellent vaccines available to provide protection from Hepatitis A.

- **Hepatitis A Only:** (the vaccines are called AVAXIM or HAVRIX)
Either of these vaccines provides long-term protection against Hepatitis A only. The schedule includes two injections to be given six months to a year apart.

- **Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B:** (the vaccine is called TWINRIX)
This vaccine is given in a series of three injections on a set schedule and provides protection against both Hepatitis A and another type of hepatitis that is spread by blood and bodily fluids.
- **Hepatitis A and Typhoid:** (the vaccine is called VIVAXIM)
Because Typhoid is a disease commonly spread in the same way as Hepatitis A, this vaccine makes it easy to protect against both diseases with one injection. For long term protection against Hepatitis A, a second injection of Avaxim or Havrix is recommended in six months to a year after the injection of Vivaxim.

What are the possible side effects?

Side effects from any of these vaccines are usually mild and short-lasting but may include:

- soreness or some redness at the injection site,
- tiredness, mild headache, muscle aches, fever, and
- nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may occur but are very rare.

Who should not be vaccinated?

- Children under 12 months of age.
- Anyone with a known allergy to any of the vaccine components.
- Anyone with an acute illness or fever.
- Pregnant or breast feeding women unless the threat of the disease warrants.

NOTE: No vaccine provides 100 percent protection against disease so other precautions to decrease the risk of exposure should be taken. Discuss these precautions with your Public Health professional or health-care provider.