Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is an inflammation of the liver caused by infection with the hepatitis A virus. This highly contagious virus is contracted by consuming food or water that has been contaminated by feces from an infected person. Rarely, the infection may also be contracted by transfer of blood or bodily secretions.

Hepatitis A is more common in children and young adults, particularly in countries where food- and water-borne epidemics caused by inadequate sanitation are common.

This is the most benign of all forms of hepatitis, and most infected people recover completely within one to two months. Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A does not progress to chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis, nor does the individual infected with hepatitis A become a carrier. Rather, once a person has recovered from hepatitis A, the individual becomes immune to the disease. They can, however, still contract hepatitis B or C.

A vaccine for the prevention of hepatitis A is available and has proven safe and effective. The Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices recommends routinely vaccinating all children age one year or older. Check with your doctor or health department about the availability of the vaccine. Immunization is also recommended for everyone with a heightened risk of contracting or communicating the virus: food handlers, medical workers, military personnel, travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis A infection, sexually-active homosexual and bisexual men, intravenous (injection into a vein) drug users, and people with liver disease. A vaccine that is a combination of hepatitis A and B (Twinrix) is available for those over age 18.

Note your symptoms

A person with hepatitis A may have no symptoms. If they do occur, they generally last less than two months, although some people are ill for up to six months. It should be noted that even without symptoms, people with hepatitis (especially children) can spread the virus to others.

A person with hepatitis A may experience a low-grade fever; muscle aches; fatigue; malaise (feeling lousy); a loss of appetite or changes in taste and smell; nausea, diarrhea or abdominal discomfort; jaundice (yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes); dark-colored urine and clay-colored stools.
Older people are more likely to have specific symptoms than children, whose illness may seem vaguely like a virus; fever and diarrhea are common. Because of this, Hepatitis A frequently goes undiagnosed in children. In extremely rare instances, hepatitis A can be severe.

### What your doctor may do

A preliminary diagnosis can often be made on the basis of your medical history and a physical examination. However, laboratory tests are necessary to confirm the diagnosis and identify the virus.

Immune globulin can help prevent infection if it is given within two weeks of exposure to the virus. Be sure your doctor is aware of any drugs you are taking, including over-the-counter medications, vitamins and herbal supplements.

### What you can do

Usually, no special treatment is required. Bed rest is not usually necessary, but extra rest may be desired because of fatigue, malaise and body aches. You may feel better if you eat most of your day’s food in the morning, rather than in the afternoon or evening. Frequent, small, low-fat, high-carbohydrate meals may be better tolerated than larger, fattier ones. In very severe cases, hospitalization may be required if an individual is unable to eat and drink enough to maintain proper nutrition, but this phase of the disease—if it occurs—lasts only a few days.

Avoid any drugs or chemicals that may put an additional strain on an already inflamed liver, such as alcohol, sedatives, or any other nonessential drugs, such as aspirin or acetaminophen (Tylenol). Also, tell your healthcare provider about any drugs you are taking, including over-the-counter (OTC) medications, vitamins and herbal supplements. To minimize the risk of spreading the virus, be sure to wash your hands frequently, especially before preparing or eating meals and after changing diapers.

### Final note

Hepatitis A infection is very common for those exposed to contaminated food or water. However, unlike other forms of hepatitis, type A never progresses into chronic forms that can permanently damage the liver. Better still, virtually everyone who is infected with the virus achieves lifelong immunity to it.

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