

## Are food handlers at higher risk for hepatitis A?

Food handlers are not at higher risk for getting hepatitis A disease than other people. However, food handlers are considered a greater public health risk than non-food handlers. This is because food handlers have the potential to infect hundreds of people during one work shift. If a food handler has hepatitis A and works while having symptoms and also uses poor personal hygiene, he/she can place the virus in foods and infect the public.

## How do food handlers spread the hepatitis A virus?

The hepatitis A virus is in the feces (stool) of an infected person. Foods may be contaminated when an infected food handler, who does not wash his/her hands carefully after using the toilet, directly touches foods that will be eaten uncooked or foods that have already been cooked and are ready to eat. This is why good personal hygiene and good hand washing are always important. Remember: the hepatitis A virus is in the feces (stool) up to two weeks before a person has any symptoms of hepatitis A and up to two weeks after the date of jaundice, dark urine, or clay colored stools appear.

## How can food handlers prevent the spread of hepatitis A?

There are four important ways a food handler can prevent the spread of hepatitis A.

1. Food handlers should never work while ill with fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, or diarrhea. If a food handler has any of these symptoms, he/she should immediately stop handling food and report the symptoms to the restaurant management and to the county health department public health nurse. Oklahoma County health departments will test food handlers that possibly have hepatitis A confidentially and free of charge.
2. Food handlers should always use good hand washing techniques – especially after each use of the restroom. The proper hand washing method is: 1) use warm water, 2) lather hands with soap, 3) scrub hands together for 20 seconds, paying close attention to scrubbing the ends of the fingers and around the fingernails, 4) rinse with warm water, 5) dry with disposable, single-use towel, and 6) turn off faucets with the towel (so that the clean hands do not touch the faucets).
3. Wear gloves when handling or preparing ready-to-eat foods. A fresh pair of gloves must be put on after each time a food handler uses the rest room, whenever gloves have been used to touch items other than food, after touching raw (to be cooked) foods, or clean utensils used to directly prepare food. A new pair of gloves should always be put on if a tear is noticed. It is important to know that gloves are not a substitute for good hand washing. Hands must always be washed prior to using gloves.
4. Food handlers can be vaccinated against hepatitis A. The local county health department will give the hepatitis A vaccine for a fee that covers the costs. Some food service employers may pay for food handling employees to receive the vaccine.

## What can be done to prevent infection with hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A vaccine is safe and effective for prevention of hepatitis A. One month after receiving the first dose of the hepatitis A series,  $\geq 94\%$  of adults should have protective levels of antibodies. Immune globulin (IG) is a shot that can also help prevent hepatitis A. It can be given to unvaccinated people that have been exposed to the hepatitis A virus. If IG is given within 14 days of the exposure, it will most likely prevent the disease.

