

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious disease that attacks the liver. It is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the U.S. In children, the disease is usually mild, but many adults who develop hepatitis A are ill enough to miss four to six weeks of work.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The first symptoms would include fever, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, tiredness, diarrhea or constipation, abdominal pain, and just "not feeling well." In a few days, these symptoms may be followed by dark (brown or "tea-colored") urine and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Infected persons usually feel better after one to two weeks, although they may continue to feel tired for a few more weeks.

How is the hepatitis A virus spread?

Hepatitis A virus is usually spread from person-to-person by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A. This type of transmission is called the "fecal-oral" route. Poor personal hygiene after using the rest room or changing diapers will contaminate the hands with feces and the hepatitis A virus. The virus can then be easily placed on foods or toys that will be placed in the mouth of other people.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The first symptoms usually appear about one month after a person is exposed to the hepatitis A virus. However, the disease can develop anytime between two to six weeks after infection.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

An infected person can spread the virus for one to two weeks before the symptoms begin, and for about two weeks after symptoms of dark urine, jaundice, or clay colored stool occur.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis A?

The persons at greatest risk of getting hepatitis A are household members, close friends/contacts, and sexual contacts of a person with hepatitis A. People at school, work, or who have brief, casual visits to the home of an infected person have little risk of getting the disease. Persons that have had hepatitis A in the past cannot get it again. Hepatitis A can be prevented by getting vaccinated with the hepatitis A vaccine.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines that will help a person to recover faster. Bed rest, drinking a lot of water, and eating a good diet are important for recovery. Since hepatitis A affects the liver, people with this disease should not drink alcohol or take any drugs (including aspirin and Tylenol) without first asking their doctor.

What can be done to protect a person that has been exposed to hepatitis A?

Immune globulin (IG) can be given to a person that has already been exposed to the virus to prevent hepatitis A. IG is a shot. IG is recommended for all household members and close (including sexual) contacts of a person with hepatitis A. IG should be given as soon as possible and must be given within 14 days after exposure to the hepatitis A virus.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

For long-term protection, hepatitis A vaccine is best. To prevent person-to-person spread, careful hand washing after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before preparing or eating food, is the single most important means of prevention. For close contacts of a person with hepatitis A, immune globulin shots are recommended to minimize the risk of disease.

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