

HEPATITIS A

Hepatitis A, also known as “infectious hepatitis,” is a viral disease of the liver that causes fever, weight loss, nausea and abdominal discomfort, followed by jaundice (yellowing of the skin). It usually lasts 1-2 weeks, but can occasionally last several months. It is rarely fatal.

Outbreaks of Hepatitis A occur most commonly in institutions and daycare centers. Epidemics in this country are most common among school-age children and young adults. Wastewater treatment plant workers are also commonly exposed to sewage contaminated with the Hepatitis A virus.

MODE OF TRANSMISSION

Hepatitis A is usually spread when the virus is taken by mouth from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated with feces of an infected person (oral-fecal route). It is not to be confused with Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C which is transmitted through infected blood. The most contagious time for Hepatitis A is a week or two before the beginning of symptoms.

Hepatitis A is often associated with contaminated water and food, including milk, sliced meats, salads, and raw or undercooked clams, oysters or mussels. Transmission of Hepatitis A can occur when infected food service workers come in contact with or prepare raw meat, fruits and vegetables. It is possible, although extremely rare, for Hepatitis A to be transmitted through transfusions of blood from an infected donor.

The **incubation** period averages 28-30 days, but can be as short as 15 days or as long as 50 days.

SAFE WORKING PROCEDURES

1. Hospital and health care workers should be trained in Hepatitis A precautions and modes of transmission.
2. Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for those who work with infected persons or animals. Some states require Hepatitis A vaccination for work with children or food.
3. Universal or standard precautions will protect workers from Hepatitis A. Gloves should be worn. Gowns should be worn if clothing may become soiled. Hands must be washed

after touching the patient or potentially contaminated articles and before taking care of another patient.

4. Articles contaminated with infective material should be discarded or bagged and labeled before being sent for laundering, decontamination or reprocessing.
5. Isolation of the patient in a separate room is only required if the patient's hygiene is poor. A patient with poor hygiene does not wash hands after touching infective material, contaminates the environment with infective material, or shares contaminated articles with other patients.
6. Day care centers should stress measures to minimize the possibility of fecal oral transmission, include careful hand washing after every diaper change and before eating.
7. Infected food service workers should be prohibited from food handling and preparation for at least 3 to 6 months.
8. Employees who have been exposed to an outbreak of Hepatitis A, or employees who have had direct fecal-oral exposure to excretions of infected persons, should be given immune globulin (IG). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not recommend routine IG vaccination for all employees who take care of patients with Hepatitis A.
9. Proper needle disposal precautions should be taken, although it is extremely unlikely that Hepatitis A would be transmitted through a needle stick. This includes disposal of all used needles and sharps in puncture proof containers. Used needles should never be broken or recapped.

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For more information about protecting workers from workplace hazards, please contact the AFSCME Research & Collective Bargaining Department, Health and Safety Program at 202-429-1215. You can also contact our office located at 1625 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20036.