

Q&A HEPATITIS A: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

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Hepatitis A is a viral infection transmitted by contaminated food and water. International travelers are at increased risk, but outbreaks have also been traced to restaurants, day care centers and schools. More recently, the virus has been found to spread from person to person during community outbreaks. For these reasons the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all children receive two doses of hepatitis A vaccine. The vaccine is also recommended for high-risk adults as well as any adult who wants to be protected against this infection.

Q. What is hepatitis A?

A. Many people with hepatitis A virus infection experience loss of appetite, vomiting, nausea, fatigue and jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin). Symptoms can last for up to six months. However, some people who catch hepatitis A virus don't have any symptoms; this is particularly true of young children who then spread the infection unknowingly. Hepatitis A virus infections — unlike hepatitis B virus infections — don't cause long-term liver disease (cirrhosis) or liver cancer. But hepatitis A can still cause hospitalization, a rapid overwhelming infection of the liver, and death.

Q. What is the risk of getting hepatitis A infection?

A. Every year, thousands of people in the United States are infected with hepatitis A and some die from the disease.

Q. How is hepatitis A spread?

A. Hepatitis A virus is found in the stools of people who are infected and is transmitted in contaminated food and water. While the virus spreads easily in countries and cities with low standards for the handling and disposal of sewage, it can also spread in households, day care centers, schools and restaurants when appropriate handwashing is not exercised, particularly after changing diapers and using restrooms and before handling food. The virus is also transmitted through foods that are consumed uncooked. Outbreaks have been associated with fresh and frozen produce obtained at grocery stores, salad ingredients at restaurants, and in products like antioxidant blends and sushi. Importantly, the virus can be transmitted by an infected person a week or two before symptoms begin.

Q. What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

A. The hepatitis A vaccine is made by taking hepatitis A virus and completely killing it with the chemical formaldehyde. People inoculated with hepatitis A vaccine become immune and won't get hepatitis A in the future. Because the virus in the vaccine is not live, individuals cannot get hepatitis A from the vaccine.

Q. Is the hepatitis A vaccine safe?

A. Yes. About 5 to 10 of every 100 people given the hepatitis A vaccine will have pain, warmth or swelling where the shot was given, and about 5 of every 100 will have a headache.



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Q. Who should get the hepatitis A vaccine?

A. The hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for all children between 12 and 23 months of age. The vaccine is given as a series of two shots; the second shot is given six to 18 months after the first. Children and teens up to 18 years of age who were not vaccinated between 12 and 23 months of age should be vaccinated at subsequent visits to the doctor. Adults who are at high risk of hepatitis A infection should also be immunized. These include people who will spend significant time with an adopted child during the first 60 days after arrival in the United States, such as close family members and babysitters; travelers to countries with high levels of hepatitis A; people with chronic liver disease or HIV; lab personnel working with hepatitis A virus; people who use illegal drugs (injection or noninjection); people experiencing homelessness; and men who have sex with men. Because people often never determine when or where they were infected with hepatitis A virus, anyone who wants to be protected should consider getting immunized.

Q. Do travelers need to get the hepatitis A vaccine?

A. Travelers can decrease their chances of getting hepatitis A by avoiding uncooked foods, such as fish, vegetables, fruits and salads, food from street vendors, and ice and unbottled water; however, this plan is not foolproof. Therefore, travelers should consult a healthcare provider about getting the vaccine as soon as they know they will be traveling.

Q. Do the benefits of the hepatitis A vaccine outweigh the risks?

A. Yes. Every year, thousands of people in the United States are infected, and some are killed by hepatitis A virus. The hepatitis A vaccine does not cause any severe reactions. Therefore, the benefits of the hepatitis A vaccine clearly outweigh its risks.



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