

Frequently Asked Questions: Hepatitis A

West Virginia is experiencing a hepatitis A outbreak. Several cases have been molecularly linked to the multi-state outbreak in which genotype 1B is the hepatitis A strain of concern; other cases have been epidemiologically linked to cases from Kentucky.

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. It can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Although rare, hepatitis A can cause death.

How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A usually spreads when a person unknowingly ingests the virus from objects, food, or drinks contaminated by small, undetected amounts of stool from an infected person. Hepatitis A can also spread from close personal contact with an infected person such as through sexual contact or caring for someone who is ill.

Who is at risk for hepatitis A?

Although anyone can get hepatitis A, certain groups of people are at higher risk such as:

- Persons who use injection and non-injection drug users
- Homeless persons
- Persons who had sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis A
- Men who have sexual encounters with other men
- People who have come into close person-to-person contact with an infected person
- People with ongoing, close contact with people who are homeless or people who use injection and non-injection drugs

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

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| •Fever | •Vomiting | •Joint pain |
| •Fatigue | •Abdominal pain | •Jaundice |
| •Loss of appetite | •Dark urine | (yellowing of the skin/eye) |
| •Nausea | •Clay-colored stools | |

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to hepatitis A?

If you think you were exposed to hepatitis A, call or visit a health professional right away since hepatitis A can be easily spread 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms show.

What should I do if I ate a restaurant where an employee has been diagnosed with hepatitis A?

The risk of contracting hepatitis A from eating at a restaurant is extremely low, even during outbreak situations. When a food service worker diagnosed with hepatitis A, he or she is immediately excluded from work and not allowed to return without a release from his or her medical provider. Additionally, all employees at the establishment are vaccinated, and disinfection and sanitation practices are followed.

Can hepatitis A be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent hepatitis A is with the hepatitis A vaccine. Practicing good hand hygiene – including thoroughly washing hands after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food – plays an important role in preventing the spread of hepatitis A.

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I work with a high-risk population for hepatitis and want to obtain vaccine for a vaccination clinic. Who should I contact?

Please contact your local health department to determine if a vaccination clinic can be arranged. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/localhealth/Pages/Map.aspx>.

I am a first responder. How can I protect myself from infection?

Use simple precautions such as washing hands after having contact with another individual and before touching or consuming food and beverages. Wear gloves according to standard contact precautions. For responders who work with individuals at risk for hepatitis A infection, vaccination can provide additional protection.

I work in a hospital. Do I need to be vaccinated against hepatitis A?

Healthcare workers are not at increased risk for hepatitis A. If a patient with hepatitis A is admitted to the hospital, routine infection-control precautions will prevent transmission to hospital staff.

Who is at increased risk for hepatitis A infection?

- Persons with direct contact with persons who have hepatitis A
- Travelers to countries where hepatitis A infections are high and native to the country
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of injection and non-injection drugs
- Persons with clotting factor disorders
- Persons working with non-human primates
- Household members and other close personal contacts of adopted children newly arriving from countries where infections of hepatitis A is high and native to the country
- Anyone with ongoing, close contact with people who are homeless or people who use injection and non-injection drugs

Who should be vaccinated against hepatitis A?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that the following persons be vaccinated against hepatitis A:

- All children at age 1 year
- Persons who are at increased risk for infection
- Persons who are at increased risk for complications from hepatitis A
- Any person wishing to obtain immunity (protection)

Where can I go to get vaccinated against hepatitis A?

If you have insurance you can see your healthcare provider or many local pharmacies (e.g. Rite Aid, CVS, Walmart, etc.) carry the vaccine. Local health departments have a limited supply of vaccine for uninsured individuals and those at highest risk for hepatitis A infection. Contact your local health department with questions: <https://dhhr.wv.gov/localhealth/Pages/Map.aspx>.

When can I find more information on hepatitis A?

- <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>
- https://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/viral-hepatitis/pages/hepA_outbreak.aspx