

Hepatitis A

Cause of Illness

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). It is found throughout the world and infects humans, not animals. In the United States, hepatitis A can occur in situations ranging from isolated cases of disease to widespread epidemics.

Hepatitis A has occurred in large, nationwide epidemics approximately every ten years, with the last increase in cases in 1989. Rates in the U.S. have been declining since 1995, and have been at historically low levels since 1998. Outbreaks have been associated with child care centers, eating establishments, as well as contaminated food and water. (In 2003, there were several outbreaks related to eating green onions.)

A vaccine is available for long-term prevention against hepatitis A. Increased use of the vaccine has contributed to marked decreases in numbers of cases since the late 1990's.

Symptoms

- Abdominal discomfort
- Appetite loss
- Nausea
- Low-grade fever
- Tiredness
- Yellow skin/eyes (jaundice)
- Dark urine
- Pale stools
- Diarrhea

Infants and young children tend to have mild or no symptoms, and they are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults.

Transmission

Hepatitis A occurs when a person ingests food or water that has been contaminated with hepatitis A virus. Infected people will pass the virus in their stool. Thus, infected people can spread the illness by contaminating food or other objects when they do not wash their hands thoroughly after using the restroom. Hepatitis A may also be transmitted through sexual contact, primarily from anal/oral contact. It is NOT spread by coughing, sneezing, or by sharing a glass, or eating utensil.

Incubation Period

Ranges from 15-50 days, lasting an average of 28 days.

Prevention and Control

Vaccination is the best prevention against hepatitis A. **Wash your hands** - after going to the bathroom, before preparing food, and before wiping children's faces. Avoid drinking untreated water (stream, lake, etc.). Ill persons should not prepare food for other people. Those who prepare food commercially or work in child or health care should not return to work until a health care provider says it is okay to do so.

Treatment

Treatment for any communicable disease should always be done in consultation with your health care provider.

Treatment is supportive.

An injection of Immune Globulin is recommended as soon as possible (within two weeks of exposure) for those exposed (in the same household) to someone with hepatitis A.

Resources

www.cdc.gov

Click on "Diseases and Conditions" and select the disease on interest.