

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Hepatitis A



### Burlington County Health Department

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**Public Health**  
Prevent. Promote. Protect.  
Burlington County Health Department  
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### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by a virus. Hepatitis A is a self-limited disease, which means it does not result in a chronic infection. Antibodies produced in response to hepatitis A last for life and protect against reinfection. The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting a vaccine.

### What are the symptoms?

More than 80% of adults with Hepatitis A have symptoms but the majority of children do not have symptoms or have an unrecognized infection. The symptoms depend on the person's age. Adults and teens are more likely to have the classic symptoms of fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, and jaundice. The signs of jaundice include dark brown urine and pale stools (feces). The whites of the eyes turn yellow, as can the skin of light-skinned people. They may also experience dark urine and clay-colored bowel movements. Young children with Hepatitis A often have mild flu-like symptoms, an upset stomach, or no symptoms at all. They seldom get jaundice. Hepatitis A symptoms last a week or two. Some adults can feel sick for as long as a few months, but this is rare.

Symptoms usually appear anywhere from 2 to 6 weeks after exposure, and usually develop over a period of several days. Symptoms usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months. **Infected people can still transmit Hepatitis A even if they do not have symptoms.**

### How is it spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually found in the stools (feces) of infected people. It is usually spread when the Hepatitis virus is taken into the mouth from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated with feces of an infected person. The virus is most likely to be spread when people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper or soiled sheets, then touch their own mouths, prepare food for others, or touch others with their contaminated hands. This spreads the disease from person to person. It can also be spread by contaminated food (such as shellfish) or water. The time of highest risk for spreading the virus to others is during the two weeks *before* symptoms begin. Most people stop being contagious one week after their symptoms start. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A virus is usually not spread by blood.

### Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can. People who live with or have sex with people who have the disease are at high risk of catching it. Hepatitis A sometimes spreads among young children in day care because many are in diapers and cannot wash their own hands, and no one knows they have the disease because they have no symptoms. Spreading among school-aged children is less common because they are more likely to have symptoms, and most have learned to wash their hands before eating and after using the toilet.

## How is it diagnosed?

A blood test looks for antibodies that fight the virus. This blood test can tell the difference between a current infection and a past one. There are also blood tests to measure how much damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.

## How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no treatment for the disease, and most people do not need any. Most infected people will feel sick for a few months before they get better. Problems such as retaining fluid and blood abnormalities are rare, but they can be treated. Most will not need to be hospitalized.

## How can you prevent hepatitis A?

- **Wash your hands.**  
Good handwashing protects you against hepatitis A and many other diseases. **Always** wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching food or eating and after using the toilet or changing a diaper.
- **Cook shellfish.**  
Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish. Thorough cooking destroys the hepatitis A virus.
- **Get hepatitis A vaccine if:**
  - You plan to travel to or work in a country with high rates of hepatitis A (Mexico; all Central and South American countries; all African, Caribbean and Asian countries except Japan; and the countries of southern and eastern Europe).
  - You live in a community with high rates of hepatitis A (Native American reservations, Alaskan Native villages, Pacific Islander villages, and some Hispanic and religious communities).
  - You have chronic liver disease.
  - You have a bleeding disorder and get clotting factors.
  - You use street drugs of any kind.
  - You are a man who has sex with other men.

## Are there any health regulations for people with hepatitis A?

Yes. Because hepatitis A can easily be spread to other people, doctors are required by law to report cases of hepatitis A to the local board of health. To protect the public, workers who have hepatitis A cannot work in any food business until their fevers are completely gone and a week has passed since their symptoms started. Coworkers may need to get IG. The term "food business" includes restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, dairy or food-processing plants, and any other place where workers handle food or drinks, give oral care (such as brushing people's teeth), or dispense medicines.

## Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at [www.cdc.gov/](http://www.cdc.gov/)
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609) 265-5548 or [www.co.burlington.nj.us/health](http://www.co.burlington.nj.us/health)
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at (609) 588-7465 or [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)