

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, daycare centers and schools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all children receive two doses of a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A.

Q. What is hepatitis A?

A. Many people with hepatitis A virus infection develop a loss of appetite, vomiting, nausea, fatigue and jaundice, a 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 my child's risk of getting hepatitis A infection?

A. Every year, thousands of people in the United States are infected with hepatitis A and approximately 50 to 100 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. It spreads easily in countries and cities with low standards for the handling and disposal of sewage; however, it can also spread in households, daycare centers, schools and restaurants when appropriate hand washing is not exercised, particularly after changing diapers and using restrooms and before handling food. 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. Children 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, they can not get hepatitis A from the vaccine.

Q. Is the hepatitis A vaccine safe?

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



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Hepatitis A: What you should know

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 not vaccinated between 12 and 23 months of age can be vaccinated at subsequent visits to the doctor during the years before school.

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 who get clotting factors; lab personnel working with the virus; injection drug users; 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, any traveler concerned about hepatitis A infection should consult a healthcare provider about getting the vaccine four weeks prior to traveling.

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

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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