



Hepatitis A

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What Is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease caused by infection with the Hepatitis A virus and mostly associated with food. One cannot tell by looking or smelling if a food is contaminated with the Hepatitis A virus. This is because viruses, unlike many bacteria and other microorganisms, do not spoil food. They can persist in food without growing in it. They do not multiply, and they do not need food, water, or air to live.

Hepatitis A has been in the news lately. Very recent reports seem to imply that it is occurring more frequently than in the past. But the fact is that Hepatitis A rates in the United States are at the lowest they have been in 40 years. The introduction of the Hepatitis A vaccine in 1995 dramatically decreased these rates.

Transmission of Hepatitis A

Although Hepatitis A can be transmitted through contaminated food and liquids, including frozen foods, and contact with contaminated environmental surfaces, the primary source of the Hepatitis A virus is persons infected with the virus. After a person consumes a contaminated food and beverage, the live virus invades the body, although it may take 2–6 weeks after exposure for symptoms to manifest. Symptoms of the illness include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, joint pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, and abdominal discomfort followed by jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). The virus is very hardy. It can survive for weeks or months in the highly acidic conditions in the human intestines. It can also survive outside the body for months. Infected persons can shed viruses in

very high numbers in vomit and feces, and can continue to shed the virus in their saliva and feces even after they recover. Thus, persons infected with the Hepatitis A virus who use the toilet and do not wash their hands properly and well are likely to retain some fecal matter on their hands, in very small amounts that cannot be seen with the naked eye, and spread the virus to food, beverages, objects, and surfaces that they touch. When other persons ingest the food and beverages, or touch objects and surfaces contaminated by the infected persons, Hepatitis A virus may be transmitted. Most reported viral outbreaks have occurred in foodservice settings, and most foods implicated are ready-to-eat (RTE) items that are not given additional cooking. Cooking at 185°F for 1.5 minutes will kill the virus.

Preventing Hepatitis A Transmission

The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated with the Hepatitis A vaccine. This is recommended for all children from 1 year of age, travelers to certain countries, and those who may be at higher risk of viral infection. A combination vaccine against Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B is available and is administered as a series of three injections.

Another way to help prevent the transmission of the Hepatitis A virus is a very simple practice. Our parents taught us this practice while we were still very young, and we learned it again in school. It is good personal hygiene—wash hands properly and well with soap and water (not hand sanitizers) after using the toilet, before handling food and beverages, before and after eating, after handling contaminated objects (e.g., trash), and any

time hands may be contaminated. Think about hand-to-mouth contact. *What did you do with your hands before you put them—or items you touched—in your mouth?*

References

- CDC. May 23, 2016. Viral Hepatitis. Hepatitis A Information. <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/afaq.htm>
- FSPCA. 2016. Preventive Controls for Human Food Participant Manual V1.2, First Ed.