

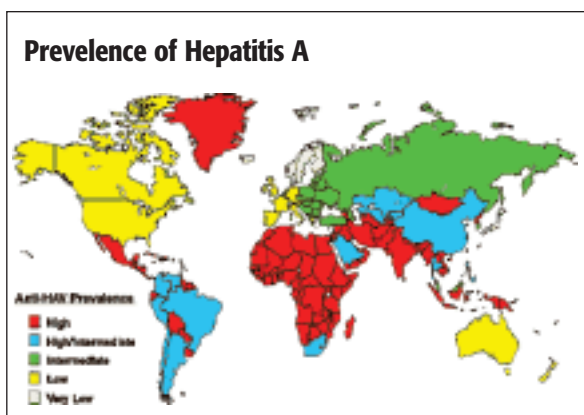
# What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus primarily affects the liver.

## Transmission

Infected people pass the virus in their stool (feces, poop, shit). The virus enters the body when hands, food, water, or objects contaminated with stool are put in the mouth. The amount of contaminated material needed to spread the infection is very small and not even visible to the eye! In rare occasions, hepatitis A is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact.

Hepatitis A infections occur at different rates around the world, It is more common in areas with poor sanitation and poor water purification systems. The map below, presented by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), demonstrates that areas of Central America, Africa, the Middle East and parts of Southeast Asia have the highest rates of hepatitis A infection. People who live in or visit these areas are at increased risk of acquiring a hepatitis A infection from contaminated food, water, or objects.



The hepatitis A virus infects hundreds of thousands of Americans each year. Given the ways that hepatitis A is spread, certain groups are at higher risk for contacting hepatitis A than others. Men who have sex with men (MSM) are at increased risk mainly from sexual contact. Any activity that involves contact with the anus of another person or something that's been in contact with the anus of another

person including used condoms, sex toys, kissing someone who's been rimming, fingering, and fisting can spread hepatitis A. Heterosexuals who engage in these practices are also at increased risk for hepatitis A infection.

Americans who travel to areas where hepatitis A is common are at increased risk for hepatitis A infections. People exposed to feces through frequent diaper changes, changing bedpans, and cleaning soiled clothing and bedding may also be at increased risk for infection.

Since hepatitis A can be transmitted through blood-to-blood contact, IV drug users who share injection equipment are at increased risk for hepatitis A infection.

## What happens after infection?

People infected by hepatitis A may or may not show symptoms, and, if symptoms occur, they can vary in severity. Infants and young children rarely show symptoms, but they can transmit the virus to others. Adults are more likely to show symptoms of infection.

When symptoms occur they usually include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Abdominal pain
- Fatigue
- Jaundice (yellowing of eyes and skin, dark urine)

Hepatitis A can be serious and life threatening. The very young, the very old, people with liver disease (including hepatitis B or C), HIV, cancer, and other conditions can have serious, even life threatening, illness. Most people, however, are ill for a few weeks to a few months and then they recover.

## Diagnosis and treatment

The only way to know for sure if someone has, or ever had hepatitis A is through a blood test. If a healthcare provider suspects hepatitis infection, they will usually test for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

If a person is exposed to hepatitis A they should contact a doctor or the health department right away. They can receive the hepatitis A vaccine and a substance called gamma globulin (another person's antibodies to hepatitis A). This treatment can help prevent infection. Once the infection is established, there is no treatment. Medications can help alleviate some of the symptoms. Once a person recovers from their infection, they will not become infected again.

### How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The most effective way to prevent hepatitis A is vaccination. A safe, effective vaccine is available for children and adults. The CDC recommends hepatitis A vaccination for all children over 12 months of age (this is a new recommendation) and all adults at increased risk for hepatitis A infection, including MSM and travelers to high endemic areas. They also recommend vaccination for people who could face serious illness if infected, including those with HIV, chronic liver disease, and other chronic diseases.

### The spread of hepatitis A can be curtailed with the following activities:

- Wash hands after using the toilet, changing diapers, or handling bedpans.
- Disinfect diaper change areas.
- Wash hands before handling food.
- Wash hands before eating.
- Boil water when recommended by local health officials.
- Avoid eating raw shellfish.
- Wash fruits and vegetables.
- Routinely wash toys, tables, and other surfaces with hot soapy water or disinfectants.
- Talk with a doctor or health department before traveling to areas noted for hepatitis A
- Wash the body prior to oral sex.
- Report hepatitis A infections to health officials.
- People with hepatitis A, or symptoms of hepatitis A, should not handle others' food.



Visit HepTREC at [www.heptrec.org](http://www.heptrec.org)  
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