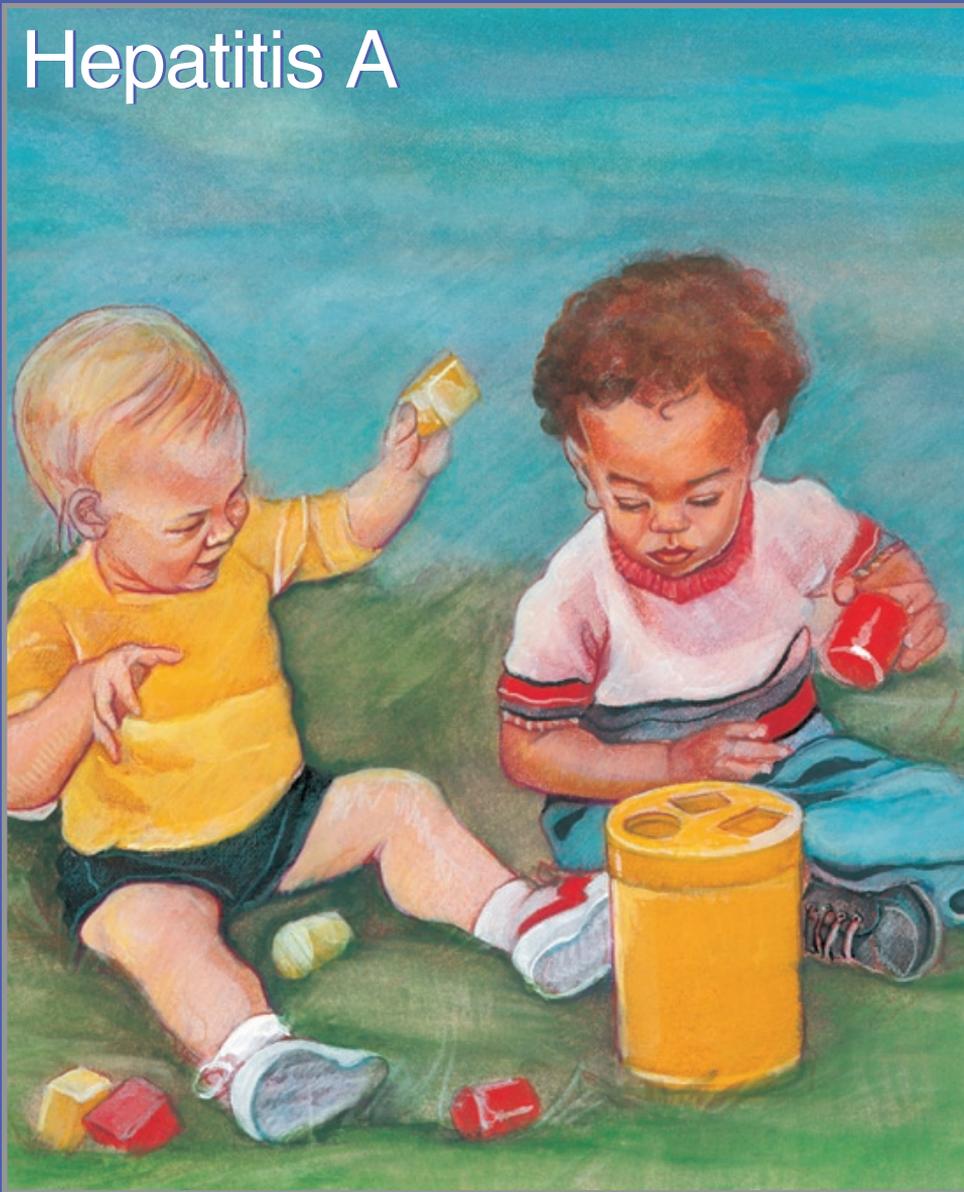


# What I need to know about Hepatitis A



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

**NIDDK** NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE  
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

National Digestive Diseases  
Information Clearinghouse



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## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver disease. **Hepatitis\*** means **inflammation** of the liver. Inflammation is the painful, red swelling that results when tissues of the body become injured or infected. Inflammation can cause organs to not work properly.

## What is the liver?

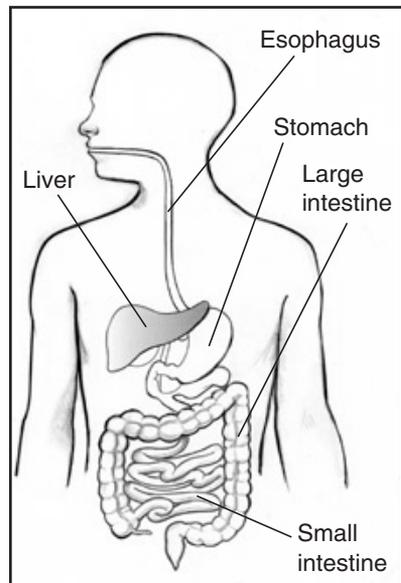
The liver is an organ that does many important things.

The liver

- removes harmful chemicals from your blood
- fights infection
- helps digest food
- stores nutrients and vitamins
- stores energy

You cannot live without a liver.

\*See page 9 for tips on how to say the words in **bold** type.



Hepatitis A is a liver disease.

## What causes hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A **virus** causes hepatitis A. Viruses are germs that can cause sickness. For example, the flu is caused by a virus. People can pass viruses to each other.

## Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but some people are at higher risk, including

- people who travel to developing countries
- people who live with someone who has hepatitis A
- people who use illegal drugs, including noninjection drugs
- men who have sex with men

## How could I get hepatitis A?

You could get hepatitis A through contact with an infected person's stool.

You could get hepatitis A from

- eating food made by an infected person who didn't wash his or her hands after using the bathroom
- drinking untreated water or eating food washed in untreated water
- placing a finger or object in your mouth that came into contact with an infected person's stool
- having close personal contact with an infected person, such as through sex or caring for someone who is ill



Wash your hands before fixing food or eating.

You cannot get hepatitis A from

- someone sneezing or coughing on you
- sitting next to a person who has hepatitis A
- hugging an infected person

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Children younger than age 6 often have no symptoms. Older children and adults often get mild, flulike symptoms, including

- tiredness
- upset stomach
- fever
- loss of appetite
- stomach pain
- diarrhea
- dark yellow urine
- light-colored stools
- yellowish eyes and skin, called **jaundice**

## How is hepatitis A diagnosed?

Blood tests will show if you have hepatitis A or another type of hepatitis.

## How is hepatitis A treated?

Hepatitis A usually gets better in a few weeks without treatment. Get lots of rest and avoid drinking alcohol, which bothers the liver. Your doctor may suggest medicines to help relieve your symptoms, or medicines you may want to avoid. If symptoms persist, especially if you are an older person, then you should see a doctor again.

When you recover, your body will have learned to fight off a future hepatitis A infection. However, you can still get other kinds of hepatitis.



Bed rest and medicine will help you get better.

## How can I avoid getting hepatitis A?

You can avoid getting hepatitis A by getting the hepatitis A **vaccine**.

Vaccines are medicines that keep you from getting sick. Vaccines teach the body to attack specific germs. The hepatitis A vaccine teaches your body to attack the hepatitis A virus.

The hepatitis A vaccine is given through two shots. The second shot is given 6 to 12 months after the first shot. Both shots are needed to be fully protected from the virus.

All children should be vaccinated and must be at least 12 months old to get the first shot. Discuss the hepatitis A vaccine with your child's doctor.

Adults at higher risk of getting hepatitis A and people with chronic liver disease should also be vaccinated.

If you are traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common, including Mexico, try to get both shots before you go. If you don't have time to get both shots before you travel, get the first shot as soon as possible. Most people gain some protection within 2 weeks after the first shot.

You can also protect yourself and others from hepatitis A if you

- always wash your hands with warm, soapy water after using the toilet or changing diapers and before fixing food or eating
- use bottled water for drinking, making ice cubes, and washing fruits and vegetables when you are in a developing country



## What should I do if I think I have been exposed to the hepatitis A virus?

See your doctor right away if you think you have been exposed to the hepatitis A virus. A medicine called hepatitis A immune globulin may protect you from getting sick if taken shortly after exposure to the hepatitis A virus.

### Points to Remember

- Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus.
- Anyone can get hepatitis A, but some people are at higher risk.
- You could get hepatitis A through contact with an infected person's stool.
- Hepatitis A may cause mild, flulike symptoms.
- Hepatitis A usually gets better without treatment.
- You can protect yourself from getting hepatitis A by getting the hepatitis A vaccine.
- See your doctor right away if you think you've been exposed to the hepatitis A virus.

## Hope through Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) supports basic and clinical research into many digestive disorders, including hepatitis A.

Participants in clinical trials can play a more active role in their own health care, gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available, and help others by contributing to medical research. For information about current studies, visit *www.ClinicalTrials.gov*.

## Pronunciation Guide

**hepatitis** (HEP-uh-TY-tiss)

**inflammation** (IN-fluh-MAY-shuhn)

**jaundice** (JAWN-diss)

**vaccine** (vak-SEEN)

**virus** (VY-ruhss)

## **For More Information**

### **American Liver Foundation**

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603

New York, NY 10038-4810

Phone: 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800-465-4837)  
or 212-668-1000

Fax: 212-483-8179

Email: [info@liverfoundation.org](mailto:info@liverfoundation.org)

Internet: [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)

### **Hepatitis Foundation International**

504 Blick Drive

Silver Spring, MD 20904-2901

Phone: 1-800-891-0707 or 301-622-4200

Fax: 301-622-4702

Email: [hfi@comcast.net](mailto:hfi@comcast.net)

Internet: [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

Other types of hepatitis exist. The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) also has booklets about hepatitis B and hepatitis C:

- *What I need to know about Hepatitis B*
- *What I need to know about Hepatitis C*



You can get a free copy of each booklet by calling 1–800–891–5389, by going online to [www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov), or by writing to

**NDDIC**

2 Information Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892–3570

Hepatitis information for health professionals is also available.

## Acknowledgments

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The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the Clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. The NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

This publication is not copyrighted. The Clearinghouse encourages users of this booklet to duplicate and distribute as many copies as desired.

This booklet is also available at [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).

This publication may contain information about medications. When prepared, this publication included the most current information available. For updates or for questions about any medications, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration toll-free at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332) or visit [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov). Consult your doctor for more information.



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