

# Idaho Falls Pediatrics

## Hepatitis A

### Illustration of the digestive system

#### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver. The liver becomes inflamed, tender, and swollen.

#### How does it occur?

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus can be spread by contact with infected bowel movements. An infected person may pass hepatitis A to others by not washing his or her hands, especially after using the bathroom. Your child might get the virus from:

- food handled by an infected person
- water contaminated with sewage
- shellfish taken from contaminated waters.

#### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after your child is infected with the virus. Hepatitis A is sometimes so mild, especially in children, that there are few or no obvious symptoms.

If your child has symptoms, the illness usually begins with:

- loss of appetite
- fever
- general aching
- tiredness.

After several days there may be:

- nausea and vomiting
- foul breath and bitter taste in the mouth
- dark brown urine
- yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- pain just below the ribs on the right side, especially if you press on that part of the abdomen
- bowel movements that are whitish or light yellow and may be looser than normal.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

Your child's health care provider will ask about your child's medical history and symptoms. The provider will examine your child's skin and eyes for signs of hepatitis and will check the abdomen to see if the liver is enlarged or tender.

Your child will have blood tests. If blood tests show that the liver is not working normally, the health care provider will do tests to find out what type of virus is causing the problems.

### **How is it treated?**

The usual treatment is rest. Very few children ever need to be hospitalized for hepatitis A.

Antibiotics are not useful in treating hepatitis A.

### **How long will the effects last?**

Recovery from hepatitis A usually takes 4 to 8 weeks. The disease rarely has lasting effects such as permanent liver damage.

Hepatitis that lasts more than 6 months usually isn't caused by hepatitis A infection.

### **How can I take care of my child?**

- Follow the health care provider's instructions for taking medicine to relieve the symptoms.
- Your child should avoid taking certain medicines (for example, acetaminophen). Ask your health care provider which medicines can be safely taken for symptoms (such as itching and nausea).

- Follow your health care provider's advice for how much rest your child needs and when he or she can return to normal activities, including school or work. As the symptoms improve, your child may gradually increase the level of activity. It is best to avoid too much physical exertion until your child's health care provider tells you it's OK.
- Even though your child may feel nauseated, it is best to eat small, high-protein, high-calorie meals. Soft drinks, juices, and hard candy may be less nauseating for your child.

### **What can be done to help prevent hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A can be spread only by people with active infections. It is usually contagious for 2 to 3 weeks before symptoms appear and for 2 to 3 weeks afterward. During this time, others can pick up the virus by touching anything contaminated with bowel movements of the infected person.

A vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis A. Two shots are given 6 months apart. Health care providers usually recommend that your child get the shots if:

- Travel or work in a developing country is planned.
- You live in an area that has outbreaks of hepatitis A.
- Your child has chronic liver disease.
- Your child receives clotting factor concentrates for a clotting disorder such as hemophilia.

If you are planning travel to an area where hepatitis A is common, your child should have the first shot at least 6 months before traveling so that there is time for the second shot before you leave. If you have less than 6 months before departure, your child should get at least 1 shot of the vaccine at least 2 weeks before you leave. This vaccine protects against hepatitis A for many years.

An injection of immune (gamma) globulin is usually given right after your child has been exposed to contaminated food or have had contact with an infected person.

Immune globulin may not always prevent hepatitis A, but it may make it milder. The protection begins almost immediately but it lasts for just 2 to 4 months.

If your child has hepatitis A, make sure he always washes his hands thoroughly after using the restroom. This will help prevent spread of the disease to others.

If someone in your household has hepatitis, take the following precautions:

- Ask your health care provider if you need to get a hepatitis or gamma globulin shot.
- Wear disposable gloves if you must have contact with the sick person's bowel movements or body fluids.
- Wash the infected person's clothing and bed linens separately from other laundry. Use very hot water and a strong detergent.
- Clean contaminated toilets and other bathroom surfaces with a disinfectant. Wear gloves when you clean. If possible, it's safest to have the infected person use a different bathroom from everyone else in the household.

For more information, call or write:

American Liver Foundation  
75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603  
New York, NY 10038  
800-GOLIVER (465-4837)  
973-256-2550

Web site: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Printed information about liver disease and hepatitis, information specialists

\*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.