

Hepatitis A Virus

Hepatitis A virus (HAV) is one of several viruses that specifically target the liver. Infection with HAV generally leads to a self-limited illness that causes temporary liver **inflammation** (damage to cells) but does not require specific treatment. However, in rare cases, the infection may result in a more serious illness, leading to **liver failure** (loss of liver functions) or death. As many as 30% of individuals in the United States have evidence of past infection with the virus. The virus is found in the feces of infected persons and is most commonly transmitted through person-to-person contact and through the ingestion of water or food that has been contaminated with feces from infected individuals. Infection with HAV is more common in developing countries where poor hygiene may be more common. The July 13, 2005, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about trends in HAV infection in the United States over the past decade.

SYMPTOMS

- Fatigue
- Fever
- Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea
- Dark or cola-colored urine
- Liver pain (pain in the upper right area of the abdomen)
- **Jaundice** (yellowing of the skin and the eyes)

DIAGNOSIS

In addition to a complete medical history and physical examination, your doctor will order blood tests to detect HAV infection and to measure liver function. Your doctor may also order blood tests to look for **hepatitis B virus** and **hepatitis C virus** (see below) infection because these viruses can cause similar symptoms.

PREVENTION

Routine vaccination against HAV is currently recommended for children older than 2 years living in states with particularly high rates of HAV infection. Vaccination is also recommended for any person with an increased risk of becoming infected with HAV, including travelers to countries where HAV is common, persons who use illegal drugs, and men who have sex with men. It is also important to contact your doctor if you think you may have been exposed to someone with the virus because a special type of immunization is available that may prevent the infection from developing.

OTHER HEPATITIS VIRUSES

Unlike HAV infection, infection with the other hepatitis viruses can cause **chronic** (long-lasting) infection leading to **cirrhosis** (liver scarring) and liver cancer.

- **Hepatitis B** is transmitted through contact with the blood of an infected person, which can occur through sexual contact, mother-to-baby transmission, illegal drug use (with contaminated needles or other drug injection equipment), or through the receipt of contaminated blood or blood products (although this is very rare now in the United States). Vaccination is available against this virus and is recommended for all newborns.
- **Hepatitis C** is also transmitted through contact with the blood of an infected person, which can occur during illegal drug use or other use of contaminated needles, sexual contact, mother-to-baby infection, or through the receipt of infected blood or blood products.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Liver Foundation
800/GO-LIVER (465-4837)
www.liverfoundation.org
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases
800/891-5389
www.niddk.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. A previous Patient Page on hepatitis B infection was published in the November 10, 1999, issue; and one on hepatitis C infection was published in the May 14, 2003, issue.

Source: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

