

Q&A on Hepatitis A



Your local health department wants to help protect you from an ongoing hepatitis A outbreak. We understand you may have questions about this and questions about getting the hepatitis A vaccine. We hope the information below helps.

Q What is hepatitis A?

A Hepatitis A is a type of tiny germ called a virus. It makes your liver get very sick. Your liver is very important and you cannot live without it. Hepatitis A can make you so sick that your liver stops working, you will be in the hospital a very long time, you need a liver transplant, or you could even die.

Q Why is it such a big deal now?

A Usually, only one or two people get hepatitis A each week in Michigan. Since August 2016, there has been a big outbreak, or a big increase, in hepatitis A in Michigan. It is not slowing down. There have been about 15 to 20 cases every week since the summer of 2017, about 10 times more than usual.

Q What is it like to have hepatitis A?

A People with hepatitis A are very sick with nausea, throwing up, belly pain, diarrhea, feeling tired, achy, feverish, and turn yellow from something called jaundice. Their sickness lasts weeks to months; 8 out of 10 that have gotten sick during this outbreak have ended up in the hospital and about 1 in 30 are dying. There is no treatment for hepatitis A.

Q Who is getting hepatitis A?

A Half of people getting hepatitis A have used some kind of drugs. About 1 in 8 are homeless or don't always have a place to live. Men that have sex with men have been 1 out of 6 of the cases, and 1 out of 14 have been in jail recently. Anyone that lives with or works with someone with these risks is more likely to get hepatitis A.

Q How is hepatitis A spread?

A The hepatitis A virus is in the feces (stool or poop) of the person sick with hepatitis A. Without realizing it, small amounts of poop can get on food or drinks and be eaten by someone, infecting them. It can also get on doorknobs, cigarettes, drugs, condoms, sex toys, silverware, or anything else that either goes in your mouth or you touch. If you touch something with the virus on it, then touch your mouth, you can get infected.

Q How long can people spread hepatitis A?

A People can spread hepatitis A for 2 weeks before they even feel sick at all, and keep spreading it for up to one week after they get sick with jaundice (turn yellow).

Q How long can hepatitis A live on things?

A Hepatitis A can live on things and still be able to make you sick for several weeks.

Q How can you keep from getting sick with hepatitis A?

A Wash your hands really well with soap and water after you use the bathroom, change diapers, have sex, and before you make food, eat food, use drugs, smoke or vape anything, or put anything in your mouth.

There is a vaccine for hepatitis A that works really well and is really safe. It is recommended that everyone at risk for hepatitis A get the vaccine.

Q How does using drugs cause hepatitis A?

A There are many possible ways. The drug itself could contain hepatitis A. Some drugs are irrigated, or watered, with dirty water that contains human sewage or poop. For example, hepatitis A has been found in samples of marijuana. Drugs may be smuggled in baby diapers or in someone's rectum or butt, allowing hepatitis A to get in the drugs that way. The hepatitis A virus has been found in the blood of infected people for over 2 months, so hepatitis A may pass between people sharing needles, syringes, or other injection supplies used for shooting drugs. Finally, people sharing drugs and sharing space together to use drugs can easily pass hepatitis A to each other.

Q How long has this vaccine been out? I think I got it when I was little kid.

A The vaccine has been recommended for all children in the United States when they turn one year old since 2006. Some older kids have also been given the vaccine since then to "catch them up" on their shots. Between 1996-2006, the vaccine was available but was recommended for people at high-risk and children in high-risk states (not Michigan at that time).

Q I got vaccinated for hepatitis for my job. Why do I need this?

A Many jobs recommend or require vaccination for hepatitis B. This is for all workers that may come in contact with blood, such as by a needlestick, as hepatitis B is spread in the blood. The hepatitis B series consists of 3 shots while the hepatitis A series is only 2 shots.

Prior to this outbreak, it was rare for employers to offer or require the hepatitis A vaccine. If you are not sure what vaccine you got, you can: look for your immunization records to find out; get the hepatitis A shot anyway as it will not harm you, or; ask your healthcare provider to order a total hepatitis A antibody to see if you have signs of immunity from previous vaccination.

Q I was sick with hepatitis A in the past. Do I need the shot?

A If you are positive you had hepatitis A in the past that was proven by a lab test (hepatitis A IgM), you do not need to get the hepatitis A vaccine. If you are not positive, you can get the

vaccine - it will not do any harm if you have had the illness before. You can also ask your healthcare provider to order a lab (total hepatitis A antibody) to see if you are immune.

Q How long does the vaccine last? How often will I need a booster shot?

A More than 95% of adults (19 out of 20) will be protected from hepatitis A within 4 weeks after getting one dose of the hepatitis A vaccine. The full series is two shots, given at least 6 months apart. After the second shot, almost 100%, or all people, are fully protected from hepatitis A. In fact, if the vaccine is given to someone within 2 weeks after they are exposed to someone sick with hepatitis A, it typically will keep them from getting sick, too. After the 2 doses given 6 months apart, no more shots are needed. The vaccine has been used for 20 years and studies so far show that the protection it gives lasts at least that long.

Q Will this shot make me sick?

A The vaccine cannot give you hepatitis A or any other infection. It is made from dead hepatitis A virus.

Q Who can't get the vaccine?

A You should not get the vaccine if you had a severe allergic reaction to a part of the vaccine or to a dose of hepatitis A vaccine in the past. If you are at risk for hepatitis A and are pregnant or breastfeeding, you CAN get vaccinated. If you are sick with common illness like a cold or flu, or on antibiotics, you CAN get vaccinated.

Q What are the side effects?

A About 1 to 2 out of 5 people do get pain, redness or swelling at the spot of the shot, which they say is mild and goes away quickly. Fewer than 1 in 10 will feel tired or have a slight fever for up to a couple of days. No serious reactions have been reported.