

Hepatitis A

The Disease

Hepatitis A, like other types of hepatitis, is a disease that affects the liver. It is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the United States, with an estimated 125,000 - 200,000 cases each year. About 3 cases out of 10 occur in children under 15 years old.

Hepatitis A is caused by a virus. Children under 6 years old who get infected often don't show any signs of illness. But for most older children, signs of hepatitis can come on quickly. They include:

- fever,
- loss of appetite and tiredness,
- stomach pain,
- vomiting,
- dark urine,
- yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).

Hepatitis A can't be distinguished from other types of hepatitis except by blood testing.

Hepatitis A does not cause long-term illness or liver damage like hepatitis B does. But every year about 100 people die from liver failure caused by severe hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A virus is found mainly in bowel movements, and is spread through personal contact or by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. For almost half the cases in the United States the source of the infection is not known. An infected person can spread the virus to other people from about a week before symptoms appear through about a week after. People without symptoms can still spread the disease.

Hepatitis A Fact: Even though the diseases are quite different, the hepatitis A virus is closely related to the polio virus.

Hepatitis A Immunization

Hepatitis A vaccine is an inactivated (killed) vaccine. It can be given to children 2 years old or older. Two doses are needed, the second dose given 6-18 months after the first.

Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for children in certain states (Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and Washington) and may also be considered for children in Arkansas, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Texas and Wyoming. The vaccine is also recommended for communities with high levels of hepatitis A, including Alaska native villages, American Indian reservations, some Hispanic communities and some religious communities. It is also recommended for others who are at high risk, including people traveling to countries where the disease is common.

Side Effects from Hepatitis A Immunization

Hepatitis A vaccine is very safe. Mild local reactions, like pain or swelling where the shot is given, are reported in up to half of people who get it. Less than one person out of ten reports fatigue or a mild fever. No serious reactions have been reported.

Like any vaccine, or medicine, hepatitis A vaccine could theoretically trigger a serious reaction in someone who is allergic to one of its components. But severe allergic reactions to childhood vaccines are very rare (estimated at around one per million doses), and no child is ever known to have died from an allergic reaction to a vaccine.

Precautions

- A child who is known to have a **severe allergy** to alum should not get hepatitis A vaccine.
- A child who has had a life-threatening **allergic reaction** after the first dose of hepatitis A vaccine should not get the second dose.
- A child who has a **moderate or severe illness** on the day a hepatitis A (or any) vaccination is scheduled should probably delay the vaccination until he or she has recovered.

After Getting hepatitis A Vaccine . . .

If the child has **any** serious or unusual problem after getting this vaccine, call a doctor or get the child to a doctor right away.