

Message from the Parish Nurses

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HEPATITIS A

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be effected. Hepatitis A still occurs in the United States, although not as frequently as it once did. Many experts believe this decline is a result of vaccination of children and people at risk for Hepatitis A. However, since March 2018, the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health has reported an increase in the number of confirmed cases of acute Hepatitis A virus.

WHAT IS HEPATITIS A?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver infection caused by the Hepatitis A virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months.

WHO IS A RISK?

Although anyone can get Hepatitis A, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- Travel to or live in countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Have sexual contact with someone who has Hepatitis A
- Men who have sexual encounters with other men
- Use recreational drugs, whether injected or not
- Have clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia
- Household members or caregivers of a person infected with Hepatitis A

HOW IS HEPATITIS A SPREAD?

Hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter-even in microscopic amounts- from contact with objects, food, or drink contaminated by feces or stool from an infected person.

Hepatitis A can be spread when:

- An infected person does not wash his/her hands properly after going to the bathroom and then touches objects or food.
- A caregiver does not properly wash his/her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person.
- Someone engages in sexual activities with infected person.

Hepatitis A also can be spread through contaminated food or water. Contamination of food can happen at any point: growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and even after cooking. This most often occurs in countries where Hepatitis A is common.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS A?

Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after infection and can include:

- Fever
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue
- Vomiting
- Grey-colored stool
- Dark urine
- Joint pain
- Abdominal pain
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin/eyes)

Symptoms are more likely to occur in adults than in children. They usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.

HOW IS HEPATITIS A DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

A doctor can determine if a person has Hepatitis A by discussing his/her symptoms and taking a blood sample. To treat Hepatitis A, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and medical monitoring. Some people will need to be hospitalized. It can take a few months for people to feel better.

HOW SERIOUS IS HEPATITIS A?

Most people who get Hepatitis A feel sick for several months, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. Sometimes Hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death, although this is rare and occurs more commonly in people older than 50 and people with other liver diseases.

CAN HEPATITIS A BE PREVENTED?

Yes. The best way to prevent Hepatitis A is by getting vaccinated. Experts recommend the vaccine for all children, and people with certain risk factors and medical conditions. The vaccine is also recommended for travelers to certain countries, even if travel occurs for short times or on closed resorts. The Hepatitis A vaccine is safe and effective and given 2 shots, 6 months apart. Both shots are needed for long-term protection. Ask if your health plan will cover travel related vaccines. You can get vaccinated at some doctor's offices, and pharmacies. Lower cost vaccinations can be gotten at the health departments.

By Barbara Mueller, RN, Faith Community Nurse
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Center for Disease Control and Prevention

More information can be found at:

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis or www.cdc.gov/travel
https://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/viral-hepatitis/Pages/hepA_outbreak.aspx

Visit: www.StAgnesShepherdstown.org for “Who Should Get Vaccinated Against Hepatitis A” and “Safety Precautions When Traveling” Click on: Parish Health Newsletter

WHO SHOULD GET VACCINATED AGAINST HEPATITIS A?

Vaccination is recommended for certain groups, including:

- All children at age 1 year
- Travelers to countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Family and caregivers of adoptees from countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Men who have sexual encounters with other men
- Users of recreational drugs, whether injected or not
- People with chronic or long-term liver disease, including Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C
- People with clotting-factor disorders

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS WHEN TRAVELING

If you're traveling to parts of the world where Hepatitis A outbreaks occur, take these steps to prevent infection:

- Peel and wash all fresh fruits and vegetables yourself
- Don't eat raw or undercooked meat or fish
- Drink bottled water and use it when brushing your teeth
- Avoid all beverages of unknown purity, with or without ice
- If bottled water isn't available, boil tap water before drinking it

By Barbara Mueller RN, Faith Community Nurse

More information can be found at:

www.jchdvw.org

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