

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver. The liver is one of the largest organs and a very important part of your body. Some of the functions of the liver include:

- It helps your body get rid of some medicines and harmful substances.
- It makes bile, which helps your body digest fats.
- It stores sugar, which your body uses for energy.
- It makes many proteins, which are the building blocks for all cells in the body.

When you have hepatitis, the liver is irritated (inflamed). It may be swollen and tender.

What is the cause?

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus can be spread by contact with infected bowel movements. Someone who is infected may pass the infection to others by not washing his or her hands, especially after using the bathroom. The infection can also be spread by anal-oral sex. You might also get the virus from:

- Food handled by an infected person
- Water that has sewage in it or shellfish taken from the contaminated water

You have a higher risk for infection if:

- You travel to places where hepatitis A is common.
- You use illegal drugs.
- You are a man who has sex with men.
- You live or work in a nursing home or rehabilitation center.
- You work in the healthcare, food, or sewage industry.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after you are infected with the virus. Sometimes hepatitis A is so mild that there are no symptoms.

If you have symptoms, the illness usually starts with:

- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- General aching
- Tiredness

Smokers may lose their taste for cigarettes.

After several days you may also have these symptoms:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Dark urine

- Yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Pain just below the ribs on your right side, especially if you press on that part of your belly
- Bowel movements that are whitish or light yellow and may be looser than normal

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and ask about any recent travel. Your provider will examine you.

You will have blood tests. If blood tests show that your liver is not working normally, you will have tests to find out if a virus is causing the problems. The tests will also determine the type of virus causing the infection.

How is it treated?

The main treatment is rest. Your healthcare provider will recommend that you avoid alcohol for at least 6 months.

Usually it's not necessary to stay at the hospital for treatment. If you get too dehydrated from nausea and vomiting, you may need to go to the hospital to get IV fluids.

Because the infection is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not helpful.

Recovery from hepatitis A usually takes 4 to 8 weeks. You may feel like you don't have much energy for months. The disease rarely has lasting effects. It usually does not cause permanent liver damage.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your provider's instructions for taking medicine for your symptoms. You need to avoid taking medicines that can damage the liver--for example, acetaminophen. Ask your provider which medicines you can safely take for your symptoms, such as itching and nausea.
- Follow your provider's advice for how much rest you need and when you can go back to your normal activities, including work or school. As your symptoms get better, you may slowly start being more active. It's best to avoid a lot of physical exertion until your provider says it's OK.
- Eat small, high-protein, high-calorie meals, even when you feel nauseated. Sipping soft drinks or juices and sucking on hard candy may help you feel less nauseated.
- Don't drink alcohol until your healthcare provider says it is safe.
- Ask your provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover from this illness
 - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities

- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I help prevent hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A 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.

You can get shots that prevent hepatitis A. Two shots are given 6 to 18 months apart. Healthcare providers usually recommend that you get the shots if:

- You travel to or work in a country that has high rates of hepatitis A.
- You live in an area that has outbreaks of hepatitis A.
- You are a man who has sex with other men.
- You inject illegal drugs.
- You have HIV/AIDS.
- You have chronic liver disease.
- You receive clotting factor concentrates for a clotting disorder, such as hemophilia.

If you are planning travel to an area where hepatitis A is common, you should have the first shot at least 1 month before you start your travels. Check with your healthcare provider about when you should have a second shot. Two shots of this vaccine can protect against hepatitis A for many years.

Hepatitis A vaccine is available as a combination vaccine with hepatitis B. Ask your healthcare provider if this is recommended for you.

If you have not had the hepatitis shots and you have been exposed to hepatitis A, you may be given the hepatitis A vaccine or you may be given a shot of immune (gamma) globulin. It's best to get the shot right after you have 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 starts almost right away but lasts for just 2 to 4 months.

If you have an active hepatitis A infection, be especially careful to always wash your hands thoroughly after using the restroom. This will help prevent spread of the disease to others.

If someone in your household has hepatitis:

- Ask your healthcare 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, body fluids, clothing, towels, or bed linens.
- Wash the infected person's clothing and bed linens separately from other laundry. Use very hot water and a strong detergent.

- Clean 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 about 1 month after they first got sick.

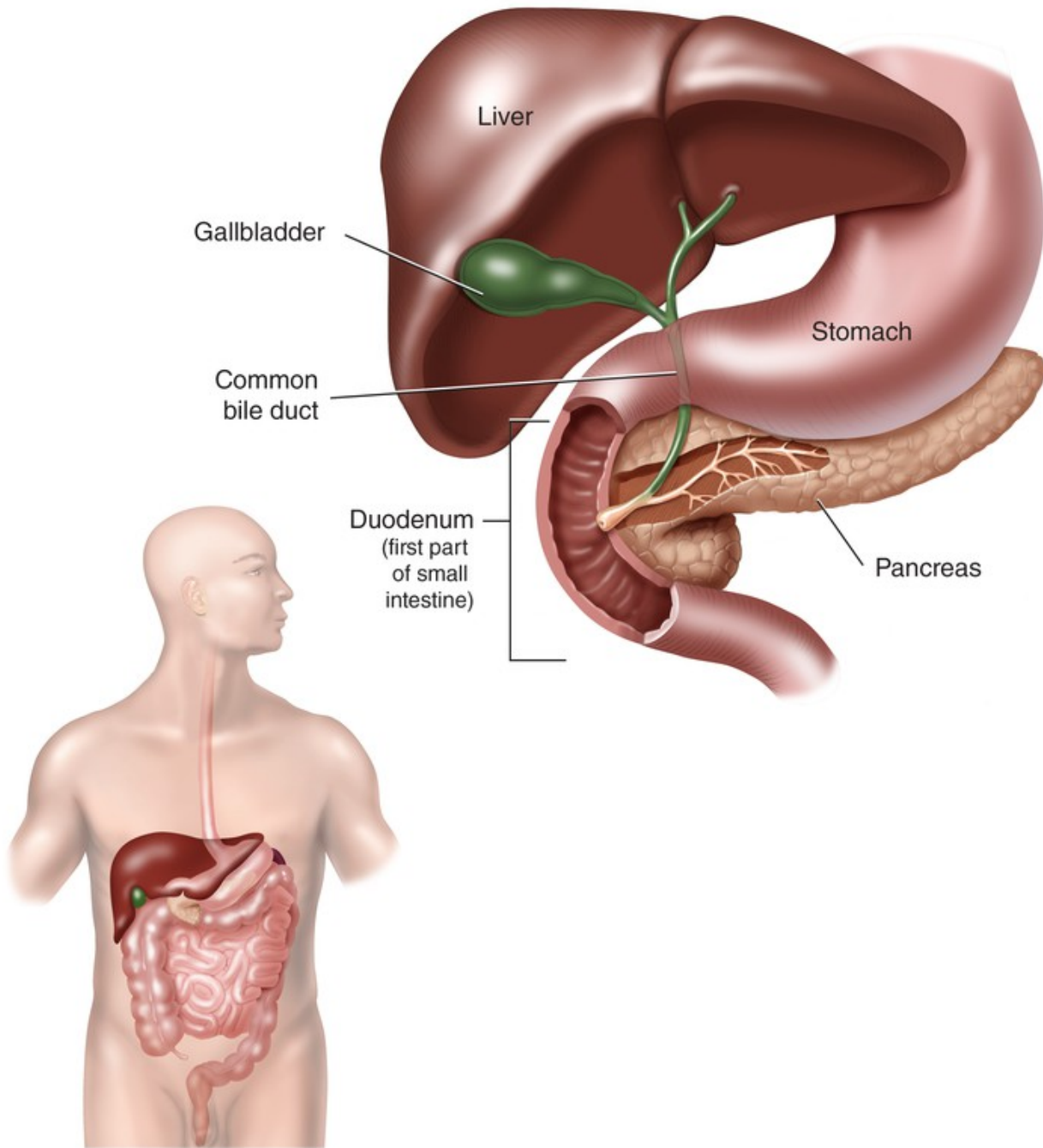
You can get more information from:

- American Liver Foundation
1-800-GOLIVER (465-4837)
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

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Liver, Gallbladder, and Pancreas



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