

Food Safety Fact Sheet

Hepatitis A and Food Handlers

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis means inflammation (or swelling) of the liver. Hepatitis A is a virus that causes liver disease. The virus is transmitted by the fecal-oral route. That means you must get something in your mouth that is contaminated with stool from an infected person. The disease is mild in children, but can be more severe in adults. It can cause infected individuals to miss up to six weeks of work.

What are the symptoms?

Infected persons may experience fever, extreme weakness, poor appetite, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhea. Symptoms are usually followed by a few days of dark “tea-colored” urine and jaundice (yellow skin and eyes). Symptoms often appear about one month after infection, but can develop anytime between two to six weeks after infection.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Infected food handlers may carry the virus on their hands and may contaminate ready-to-eat food if they do not use good handwashing practices after every restroom visit and they have bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat food. The disease spreads when it enters the mouth of a person who has not had Hepatitis A before or is not immunized against Hepatitis A.

Good handwashing after restroom visits and no bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat food greatly reduce the spread of Hepatitis A from an infected food handler to others.

How long can an infected person spread Hepatitis A?

An infected person can spread the virus for 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms start and up to 10 days after jaundice. An infected person may shed Hepatitis A virus for almost a month.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A. Bed rest and avoiding alcohol, drugs and over-the-counter

medicines is recommended for a faster recovery. Once recovered, a person cannot spread the disease further, is immune for life and cannot be infected again.

Are food handlers at higher risk for Hepatitis A?

Food handlers are not at a higher risk for becoming infected. However, infected food handlers are at higher risk for spreading Hepatitis A to others. Food Handlers have the potential to infect hundreds of people if they work while infected with Hepatitis A, do not follow good handwashing practices and have bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods.

What if a food handler is experiencing symptoms of Hepatitis A?

If a food handler is experiencing symptoms of Hepatitis A, the food handler should not handle food, should seek medical care and should not return to handling food until 2 weeks after the beginning of the illness.

What about an infected food handler's co-workers?

Co-workers who worked the same days and shifts of an infected food handler should not be allowed to handle food until they receive a shot of immune globulin (IG) to help prevent Hepatitis A, or show proof of previous infection or previous vaccination. The co-workers may return to handling food if they receive IG or provide proof of immunity and are not experiencing any symptoms. If the co-workers refuse IG, they are not allowed to handle food for 50 days starting from their last contact with the infected food handler during the time the food handler was still contagious.

What is the Hepatitis A vaccine?

The Hepatitis A vaccine is a shot of inactive virus that stimulates the natural immune system. After the vaccine is given, the body makes antibodies that protect against that virus. These antibodies are stored in the body for several years and will fight off the infection if the person is exposed to the Hepatitis A virus.