



Who

An estimated 1.4 million cases of hepatitis A occur each year, both sporadically or in an epidemic form. Risk factors are person-to-person contact (same household, sexual or daycare center transmission) or exposure by contaminated food or water.



What

Infection is caused by the hepatitis A virus, of which humans are the only known reservoir. Usually, it is a self-limited disease that does not become chronic. In fact, liver injury occurs as a result of the patient's own immune response to the virus. Infection confers lifelong immunity.



Where and when

Hepatitis A infection occurs worldwide, mainly in less developed countries. The virus is usually transmitted by the fecal-oral route. Important risk factors for severe disease include age older than 50 years and underlying liver disease.

Prevention

Vaccination is efficacious and is the primary tool for protection. Hygienic practices for prevention include handwashing, avoiding tap water and raw foods in areas with poor sanitation, and heating foods appropriately. Sometimes, protection after exposure may be warranted by vaccination or passive immunization by means of immune globulin.



Treatment

Hepatitis A infection is usually self-limited, and treatment consists of supportive care. Medications that may cause liver damage should be used with caution. Patients with fulminant liver failure should be transferred to a center capable of performing liver transplantation.

Symptoms

Symptomatic illness occurs in more than 70% of adults but is uncommon in young children. It starts with abrupt onset of nausea, vomiting, anorexia, fever, malaise, and abdominal pain. Within a few days to a week, dark urine appears and pale stools may be observed. These are followed by jaundice and pruritus in 40-70% of cases.



In case of infection

The incubation period averages 28 days. Full recovery is observed within 2-3 months in 85% of patients, and complete recovery is observed by 6 months in nearly all patients. Fulminant liver failure occurs in less than 1% of cases.