

Patient education: Hepatitis A (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is hepatitis A? — Hepatitis A is an infection that harms the liver. The liver is a big organ in the upper right side of the belly ([figure 1](#)).

Hepatitis A is caused by a virus. When people have hepatitis A, the virus leaves their body in their bowel movements. If infected people do not wash their hands after they use the bathroom, they can have the virus on their hands. Then they can spread the virus to anything they touch, including food, water, and other people.

People all over the world can get hepatitis A.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A? — In children, hepatitis A does not usually cause any symptoms. In adults, hepatitis A causes a flu-like illness that starts suddenly about a month after a person is infected.

At first, symptoms usually include:

- Feeling tired
- Nausea or vomiting
- Having no appetite
- Fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C)
- Pain under the ribs on the right side of the belly

Later on, symptoms usually include:

- Dark-colored urine
- Light-colored bowel movements
- Jaundice, which is when the skin or white part of the eyes turn yellow
- Itchy skin

Rarely, hepatitis A can cause liver damage that can lead to death.

How do people get hepatitis A? — People can get hepatitis A after they eat food or drink water with the virus in it. People can also get it if they touch something that has the virus on it and then touch their food or put their hands in their mouth.

Is there a test for hepatitis A? — Yes. To check if you have hepatitis A, your doctor or nurse will do an exam and blood tests.

How is hepatitis A treated? — Most of the time, the infection will get better on its own. But there are things you can do at home to help your liver heal. You can:

- Get plenty of rest — Do not return to work or school until your fever is gone, your appetite is back, and your skin and eyes are no longer yellow.
- Avoid drinking alcohol

- Avoid certain medicines – Your doctor or nurse will tell you which prescription and over-the-counter medicines to avoid.

In rare cases, people need to be treated in the hospital.

When will I feel better? — It can take a few months to feel better. Most people are completely better within 6 months of getting infected. Hepatitis A does **not** lead to lifelong liver problems.

Can hepatitis A be prevented? — Yes. To help prevent getting or spreading hepatitis A, you can:

- Wash your hands after going to the bathroom, changing diapers, and touching garbage or dirty clothes. Also, be sure to wash your hands before preparing food and eating.
- Get the [hepatitis A vaccine](#) – Vaccines are treatments that prevent infections. Doctors recommend that adults get the hepatitis A vaccine if they have a higher than normal chance of getting the infection. This includes adults who plan to travel to certain countries or have certain medical conditions.
- Make sure that your child gets the [hepatitis A vaccine](#) – Doctors recommend that all babies get the hepatitis A vaccine as one of their routine childhood vaccines.
- Pay attention to food safety ([table 1](#)):
 - Don't drink unpasteurized milk or foods made with it
 - Wash fruits and vegetables well before eating them
 - Keep the refrigerator colder than 40°F (4.4°C) and the freezer below 0°F (-17.8°C)
 - Cook meat and seafood until well done
 - Cook eggs until the yolk is firm
 - Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after they touch raw food

What if I live with or was with someone who has hepatitis A? — If you live with or were with someone who has hepatitis A, let your doctor or nurse know as soon as possible. If you never got the [hepatitis A vaccine](#), you might need to get it. Or your doctor might give you a shot of medicine to help prevent you from getting the infection.

You can catch hepatitis A from someone who is infected and is not yet having symptoms. You can also catch it from someone who has symptoms until the week after they develop jaundice (which is when the skin or white part of the eyes turn yellow).

More on this topic

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[Patient education: Vaccines for travel \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Vaccines for babies and children age 0 to 6 years \(The Basics\)](#)

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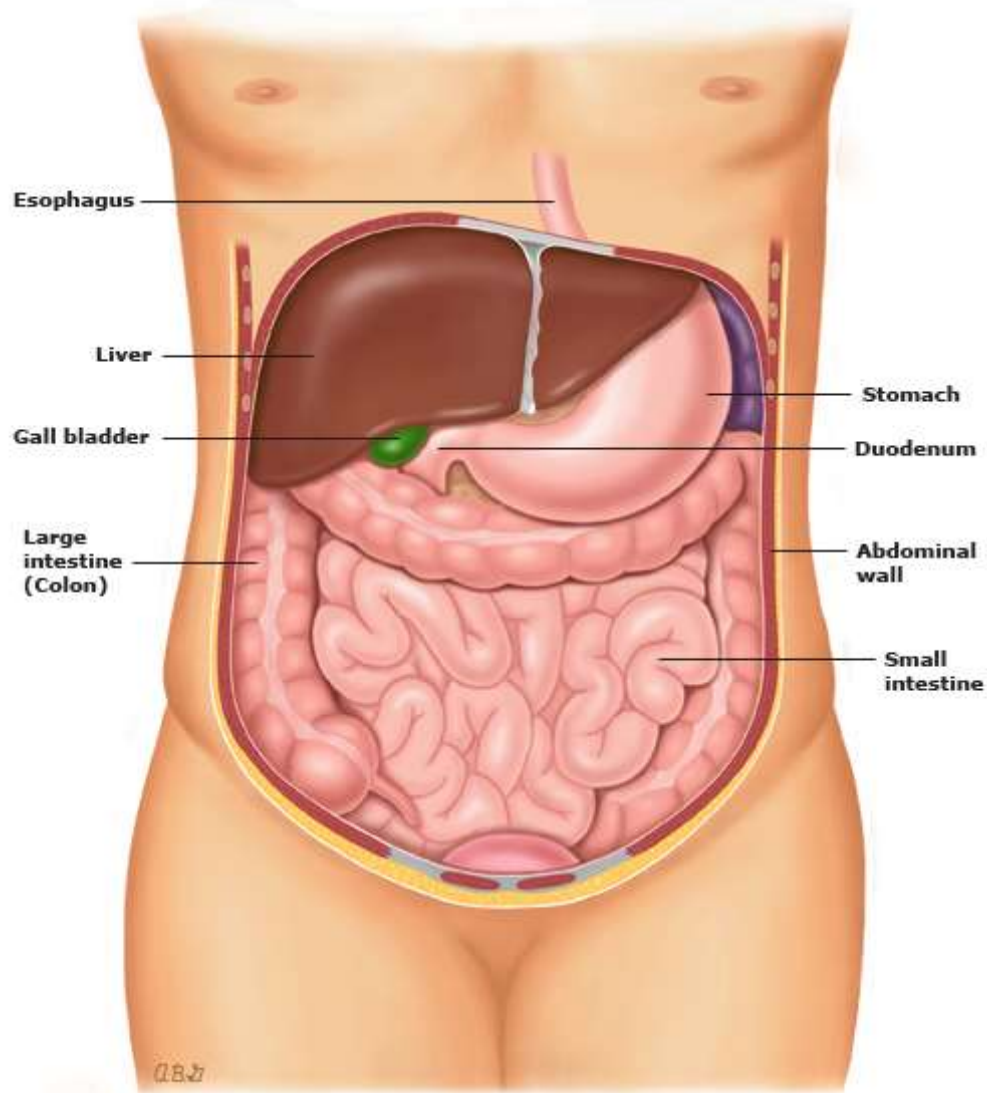
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GRAPHICS

Organs inside the abdomen (belly)



Graphic 64960 Version 6.0

Tips for safe food handling

Purchase

Do not buy already-cooked food that is stored next to raw food, even if it is stored on ice.

Do not buy food in cans that are dented, cracked, or have a bulging lid.

Storage

Make sure meat and poultry products are refrigerated when bought.

Use plastic bags to keep juices from meat and fish from touching other foods.

Store perishable items (that can go bad quickly) in the refrigerator within an hour of buying.

Keep refrigerator temperature between 32 and 40°F (0 and 4°C) and freezer temperature at or below 0°F (-18°C).

Freeze meat and poultry that will not be cooked within 48 hours.

Freeze tuna, bluefish, and mahi-mahi that will not be cooked within 24 hours. Other fish can be stored in the refrigerator for 48 hours.

Do not store eggs on the refrigerator door (since that is the warmest part of the refrigerator).

Put leftovers in the refrigerator within 2 hours of cooking them.

Divide leftovers into parts and store in small containers.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F (74°C) before eating.

Preparation

Wash hands with soap and water before cooking and after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or raw eggs.

Thaw frozen meats and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, not by leaving them out.

Marinate foods in the refrigerator, not at room temperature.

Avoid contact of cooked foods with forks, spoons, knives, plates, or areas that might not be clean.

Wash forks, spoons, knives, plates, and cutting areas with soap and water after they have touched raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs.

Avoid letting the juices from uncooked meat, poultry, or fish touch cooked foods or foods that will be eaten raw.

Carefully wash all fresh fruits and vegetables.

Avoid recipes that include raw eggs.

Cooking

Use a meat thermometer.

- Cook beef, veal, and lamb (steaks, roasts, chops) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.
- Cook ground beef, pork, veal, and lamb to 160°F (71°C).
- Cook poultry (chicken, turkey) to 165°F (74°C).
- Cook fresh pork (roasts, chops, ham that is not precooked) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.
- Cook precooked ham to 140°F (60°C).
- Cook fish until the flesh is firm and separates easily with a fork.
- Cook shellfish until the flesh is firm.

Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm.

Boil juices from raw meat or fish before using on cooked food.

Serving

Serve cooked foods on clean plates with clean forks, spoons, and knives.

Keep hot foods at 140°F (60°C) and cold foods below 40°F (4°C).

Never leave foods at room temperature longer than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the room is hotter than 90°F (32°C).

Use coolers and ice packs to take perishable foods (that might go bad) away from home.

United States Department of Agriculture. Food Safety. Available at <http://www.foodsafety.gov> (Accessed on January 19, 2016).

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