

Acute Hepatitis A

Definition:

Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV).

Signs and symptoms:

The symptoms of hepatitis A include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, diarrhea and vomiting. Jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover without any complications after several weeks. Infants and young children tend to have very mild or no symptoms, and are much less likely to develop jaundice than older children and adults.

Transmission:

Hepatitis A virus spreads from person to person by swallowing something that is contaminated with feces from a person who is infected with hepatitis A. Contaminated food, water and raw or undercooked shellfish can also spread the virus. Most infections result from contact with a household member or sex partner who has hepatitis A. Because the virus is passed in the stool, children with hepatitis A who are not toilet trained can be an important source of the infection. Casual contact, as in the office or at school, does not usually spread the virus.

Diagnosis:

Hepatitis A is diagnosed by a combination of lab tests and clinical signs and symptoms.

Role of the School Nurse:

Prevention

- Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for all children one year old or older as well as for persons at increased risk. Vaccination consists of two shots, given six to twelve months apart.
- Encourage hand washing particularly after using the bathroom and before handling food or drinks to prevent the spread of disease.

Treatment Recommendations

- If acute infection is suspected, the student should be referred immediately to their primary care provider or local emergency department for further evaluation.

Exclusions

Cases in schools should be excluded for one week after onset of illness. A person is considered infectious from two weeks before to one week after symptom onset. Food handlers with hepatitis A should be excluded until it has been more than seven days since the onset of jaundice, or more than 14 days since other symptoms started (Maine Food Code).

Reporting Requirements

Acute hepatitis A is a reportable condition and should be reported immediately upon recognition or strong suspicion to Maine CDC at 1-800-821-5821.

Resources:

- Maine CDC Hepatitis website (including fact sheet)
<http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/hepatitis/index.shtml>
- Federal CDC Hepatitis website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/index.htm>
- Immunization Action Coalition website (including vaccine information)
<http://www.immunize.org/hepatitis-a/>