



# Whatcom County Health Department

## **FACT SHEET: HEPATITIS A**

### **What is hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A is a viral liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. Symptoms may include diarrhea, fever, lack of energy, nausea, abdominal discomfort and jaundice (yellow color to the whites of the eyes or skin and darkening of urine). Not all symptoms are experienced by infected persons. Many cases in children have no symptoms. In adults, the infection usually causes severe illness that can last several months. There are no long-term complications.

### **Who gets hepatitis A?**

- The highest rates of hepatitis A are among children and young adults, but anyone can get hepatitis A.

### **How common is it in Washington?**

- The last major outbreak in Washington was in the second half of the 1980's, peaking in 1989 with 70 cases per 100,000 people (3,273 cases).
- In 2001, Washington's rate fell to 3 cases per 100,000 and the number of cases has continued to decline through 2004. Recent Whatcom County rates have been even lower.

### **Where does it come from?**

- The virus is present in the feces of an infected person two weeks before and up to two weeks after symptoms begin.
- The person is most infectious a week before to a week after symptoms appear.
- An infected person with no symptoms can still infect others.
- Animals do not transmit hepatitis A.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

- Symptoms typically appear 30 days after exposure, but can occur between 15 and 50 days.

### **How is a person exposed?**

- Most infections are the result of eating something contaminated with the feces of an infected person.
- People may become infected after they eat uncooked food prepared by an infected person with poor personal hygiene, especially improper hand washing after using the bathroom or changing a baby's diaper.
- Although uncommon in Washington, contaminated water and raw shellfish can also spread the virus.

### **Is there a vaccine available?**

- Yes. The hepatitis A vaccine can provide long-term protection against the disease.
- Immune globulin can also be useful in preventing hepatitis A. When given within 14 days of exposure, it can provide short-term protection for persons.

### **Who needs to be vaccinated against hepatitis A?**

- As of January 12, 2006, all children should receive hepatitis A vaccine at 1 year of age (i.e., 12-23 months).
- Men who have sex with men.
- Persons who use street drugs.
- Persons with chronic liver disease or blood clotting disorders.

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For more information, or to report a hepatitis A case, call the Whatcom County Health Department at (360) 676-6724.