

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

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

Who should get the hepatitis A vaccine?

You may need the vaccine against hepatitis A if you

- have a chronic liver disease such as hepatitis C
- use illegal drugs
- are a man who has sex with other men
- work in a setting that puts you at risk for hepatitis A infection
- receive blood products such as clotting factors
- live in areas or in communities where there are high rates of hepatitis A infection
- travel or work in countries with high rates of hepatitis A infection

How is the vaccine given?

For both adults and children, the vaccine is given in two shots, usually in the muscle of the upper arm. The first shot should be followed by a second shot six months to a year later. You may get the hepatitis A vaccine at the same time you receive other kinds of vaccines. It is not recommended that children under two years old get the hepatitis A vaccine.

After I am vaccinated, how long will I be protected against the virus?

If you are vaccinated and develop antibodies, you will be protected against hepatitis A for at least 20 years. If you are unsure if you were vaccinated, ask your doctor to check to see if you have antibodies in your body to protect you against the virus.

Vaccination is the best way to prevent hepatitis A.

Will the vaccine protect me if I was recently infected with hepatitis A?

If you were recently infected with the virus, you may still get temporary protection with a shot of *immunoglobulin* (IG), which is a mixture of antibodies. It may protect you from the virus for three to five months. It works best if you get this shot within two weeks after your exposure.

If you are traveling within a month to places that have high rates of hepatitis A infection, and you have not already received the vaccine, a shot of IG may protect you. Side effects of IG are rare and may include swelling, hives, and other allergic reactions.



What are the side effects of the hepatitis A vaccine?

The hepatitis A vaccine is made from inactive virus and is quite safe. In general, there are very few side effects. The most common side effect is soreness at or around the injection site, and other side effects include mild headache, loss of appetite among children, and feeling tired. These side effects usually begin three to five days after the vaccination and may last one to two days.

However, like any medicine, the vaccine may cause serious problems, such as an allergic reaction, which may appear within a few minutes or hours after the shot. This occurs very rarely, but if you believe you are having a reaction to the vaccine, you should call your doctor or nurse right away. Some warning signs of a serious allergic reaction include the following:

- High fever
- Behavior changes
- Difficulty breathing
- Hoarse voice or wheezing
- Hives
- Pale skin
- Weakness or dizziness
- A fast heart beat

Can I get hepatitis A from the vaccine?

You will **NOT** get hepatitis A from the vaccine, and receiving the vaccine is much safer than getting the disease itself. Pregnant women have received the hepatitis A vaccine with no risk to the baby.

Are there people who should NOT get the hepatitis A vaccine?

You should not get the hepatitis A vaccine or you should wait, if you

- had a serious allergic reaction to a previous hepatitis A vaccine
- are ill at the time the shot is scheduled (If you are just mildly ill, ask your doctor or nurse if it is okay for you to receive the vaccine.)

Can I get the hepatitis A vaccine at VA?

Yes, speak with your VA health care provider to see if you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at

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IB 10-158 Revised June 2004*