



In October 2005, a federal advisory committee to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that all children receive a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A. Before that, the hepatitis A vaccine, first available in 1995, was recommended only for children living in states with elevated rates of hepatitis A.

Q. What is hepatitis A?

A. Hepatitis A is a virus that infects the liver.

Q. What are the symptoms of hepatitis A virus infection?



A. Many people with hepatitis A virus infection develop a loss of appetite, vomiting, nausea, fatigue and jaundice, a yellowing of the eyes and skin. However, some people who catch hepatitis A virus don't have any symptoms. Hepatitis A virus infections — unlike hepatitis B virus infections — don't cause long-term liver disease (cirrhosis) or liver cancer.

But hepatitis A can still cause hospitalization, a rapid overwhelming infection of the liver and death.

Q. What is my child's risk of getting hepatitis A infection?

A. Every year, about 20,000 to 30,000 people in the United States are infected with hepatitis A and approximately 100 die from the disease. Hepatitis A virus is usually spread in households from person to person, and in contaminated food and water.

Q. If the hepatitis A vaccine has been available since 1995, why is it recommended for all children now?

A. The CDC has made recommendations in several steps for using hepatitis A vaccine to prevent the disease in the United States.

In 1996, the CDC recommended that the vaccine be given to all children who lived in states with the highest hepatitis A rates, as well as certain communities, such as American Indian reservations and Alaska Native villages.

In 1999, the CDC recommended that the vaccine be given to children living in 11 states where the hepatitis A incidence rate had been at least twice the national average before the hepatitis A vaccine was available (Arizona, Alaska, Oregon, New Mexico, Utah, Washington, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Nevada, California and Idaho), and that it be considered in an additional six states where the rate had been greater than the national average during this time. This strategy led to about an 80 percent decline in the incidence of hepatitis A.

In 2005, the CDC advisory committee recommended that all children in the United States be given the hepatitis A vaccine. Several observations supported this new strategy. First, two-thirds of current cases of hepatitis A were occurring in states in which hepatitis A vaccine was not recommended for children. Second, despite a clear decline in the incidence of infection during the past 10 years, every year, 20,000 to 30,000 Americans were newly infected with hepatitis A.

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Hepatitis A: What you should know

Q. What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

A. The hepatitis A vaccine is made by taking hepatitis A virus and completely killing it with the chemical formaldehyde. Children inoculated with hepatitis A vaccine become immune and won't get hepatitis A in the future. Because the virus in the vaccine is not live, they do not get hepatitis A from the vaccine.

Q. Is the hepatitis A vaccine safe?



A. Yes. About 5 percent to 10 percent of children given the hepatitis A vaccine will have pain, warmth or swelling where the shot was given and about 5 percent will have a headache.

Q. Who should get the hepatitis A vaccine?

A. The hepatitis A vaccine is now recommended for all children between 12 and 23 months of age. The vaccine is given as a series of two shots; the second shot is given six to 18 months after the first. Children not vaccinated between 12 and 23 months of age can be vaccinated at subsequent visits to the doctor during the years before school.

Q. Do the benefits of the hepatitis A vaccine outweigh the risks for my child?



A. Yes. Every year, thousands of people in the United States are infected, and some are killed by hepatitis A virus. The hepatitis A vaccine does not cause any severe reactions. Therefore, the benefits of the hepatitis A vaccine clearly outweigh its risks.

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This information is provided by the Vaccine Education Center at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The Center is an educational resource for parents and healthcare professionals and is composed of scientists, physicians, mothers and fathers who are devoted to the study and prevention of infectious diseases. The Vaccine Education Center is funded by endowed chairs from The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Kohl's Department Stores. The Center does not receive support from pharmaceutical companies.

Some of this material was excerpted from the book, *Vaccines: What You Should Know*, co-authored by Paul A. Offit, M.D., and Louis M. Bell, M.D.



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