What is Hepatitis A?
Hepatitis A is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis A virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months.

Hepatitis A still occurs in the United States, although not as frequently as it once did. Over the last 20 years, there has been more than a 90% decrease in hepatitis A cases. New cases are now estimated to be around 20,000 each year. Many experts believe this decline is a result of the vaccination of children and people at risk for hepatitis A.

Spread of Disease
Hepatitis A is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter—even in microscopic amounts—from contact with objects, food, or drinks contaminated by feces or stool from an infected person.

Hepatitis A can be spread when:

- An infected person does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom and then touches objects or food
- A caregiver does not properly wash his or her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person
- Someone engages in certain sexual activities, such as oral-anal contact with an infected person

Hepatitis A also can be spread through contaminated food or water. This most often occurs in countries where hepatitis A is common, especially if personal hygiene or sanitary conditions are poor. Contamination of food can happen at any point: growing, harvesting, processing, handling, and even after cooking.

The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. Frequent hand washing with soap and water—particularly after using the bathroom, changing a diaper or before preparing or eating food—also helps to prevent the spread of the disease.

Signs and Symptoms
Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after becoming infected and can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea/vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Grey-colored Stools
- Dark Urine
- Joint pain
- Jaundice

Symptoms are more likely to occur in adults than in children. They usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.
Hepatitis A can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.

Treatment and Complications
To treat hepatitis A, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and medical monitoring. Some people will need to be hospitalized. It can take a few months before people begin to feel better.

Most people who get hepatitis A feel sick for several months, but they usually recover completely and do not have lasting liver damage. Sometimes hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death, although this is rare and occurs more commonly in people older than 50 and people with other liver diseases.

Diagnosis
A doctor can determine if a person has hepatitis A by discussing his or her symptoms and taking a blood sample.

People at Risk
Although anyone can get hepatitis A, some people are at a greater risk, such as those who:

- Travel to or live in countries where hepatitis A is common
- Have close contact with someone who has hepatitis A, including household members and caregivers
- Are men who have sexual encounters with other men
- Use recreational drugs, whether injected or not
- Have clotting-factor disorders, such as hemophilia
- Have been in jail
- Pay for sex or trade sex for money
- Consume food prepared by someone infected with hepatitis A

For more sources of information on this topic visit:
ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov
US FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION www.fda.gov