

Unprotected People #30

Hepatitis A

Traveling filmmaker reflects on the high cost of hepatitis A virus infection

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In October 1993, I traveled to Mexico as a freelance filmmaker and documentary producer to work on a program for PBS regarding the sense of taste. I was filming around the festival of The Day of the Dead, traveling the countryside and sampling food in local people's homes. It was in Vera Cruz, where I sampled a warm corn drink, that I believe I contracted the virus I would later learn was hepatitis A.

I returned from my trip to Mexico feeling lousy and tired, but still unaware that I was sick. Weeks later, my symptoms had progressed to fatigue, chills, and body aches. But it wasn't until a co-worker told me that my eyes and skin appeared yellow that I knew something was definitely wrong. Thirty days after returning from Mexico, I was diagnosed with hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A was very debilitating, and was the first serious illness I had ever had. Just prior to my diagnosis, I experienced an acute phase of a flu-like illness that lasted several days. Following my diagnosis, I lost 35 pounds and was severely jaundiced. I also

suffered irregular body temperature fluctuations, extreme fatigue, and severe itching that prevented me from sleeping through the night for almost two months.

I lost four months of income because I was unable to work. When I did return to work, I was plagued by fatigue and was noticeably less efficient. All in all, it took eight months to fully recover, and another two years to dig myself out of the financial hole I found myself in.

It was not necessary for me to have gotten as sick as I did. I feel like I had this chunk of my life ripped out from me that I would not have lost if I had been vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Although I continue to travel internationally for my job and have acquired a natural immunity to the hepatitis A virus, I made a point of getting the hepatitis B vaccine and strongly encourage my co-workers and crew to get vaccinated against these diseases when traveling.

Tom