What is hepatitis?
Hepatitis is a general term meaning inflammation of the liver. The most common cause is infection by one of the five types of Hepatitis viruses called A, B, C, D, and E. The most common forms of hepatitis in the United States are A, B, and C.

Less commonly, hepatitis results from other viral infections, such as infectious mononucleosis, yellow fever, and cytomegalovirus infection. In addition, alcohol, drugs, certain medications, and poor blood flow to the liver can cause hepatitis.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?
All hepatitis viruses can cause acute (short term) disease with one or more of the following symptoms:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes)
- Right upper abdominal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Dark urine
- Pale stool
- Low-grade fever
- Muscle and/or joint pain
- Extreme fatigue
- Weakness

How is hepatitis diagnosed?
Hepatitis is diagnosed through medical examination and laboratory testing.

The Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) can be found in the stool of a person infected with the virus and is transmitted via the fecal-oral route. Transmission can occur by drinking water or eating foods contaminated with fecal material containing the virus. Hepatitis A can be contracted through close personal or sexual contact with an infected person. Illness with Hepatitis A usually resolves on its own. There are no known chronic (long term) infections.

The Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) is spread through contact with the blood and body fluids of an infected person. This can occur through direct blood-to-blood contact, unprotected sex, injection drug use, and from an infected mother to her newborn during birth. Acute Hepatitis B usually resolves on its own after a few months; however, some people may develop a chronic infection.

The Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is transmitted primarily through direct exposure to blood infected with HCV. In rare cases it can also be transmitted sexually. Individuals who may come in contact with infected blood, such as healthcare workers and injection drug users are at high risk of contracting Hepatitis C. In some cases, an infection with HCV may resolve on its own. However, most cases (70-90%) lead to chronic infection.

What kind of treatment is available for hepatitis?
Currently there are no treatment options for acute cases of hepatitis. While there is not a definitive cure for a chronic infection, antiviral medications are available for chronic HBV and HCV infections.

Is there a way to prevent a hepatitis infection?
The Hepatitis A vaccine is the best protection available for Hepatitis A prevention. Immune globulin is also available for short term protection against Hepatitis A. It should be given within 2 weeks after coming in contact with HAV. Using good hygiene techniques (washing hands with soap and water after using the bathroom, changing a diaper, and before preparing and eating food) plays a vital role in Hepatitis A prevention.

Immunization with the Hepatitis B vaccine is the most effective way of preventing HBV infection. Immune globulin is also available, offering short term protection if given immediately after exposure.

Currently there is not a vaccine available for Hepatitis C; therefore, prevention plays a crucial role in stopping the spread of HCV.
How effective is the vaccine?
Although vaccines are available to protect against the Hepatitis A and B viruses, the following measures should be taken to help reduce the transmission of all hepatitis viruses and other diseases.

- Do not share personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, and nail clippers
- Practice good hygiene and wash hands frequently and properly
- Avoid contact with other people’s bodily fluid such as blood, semen and vaginal secretions
- Limit number of sexual partners and use a condom consistently and correctly during any type of sexual activity
- Do not share needles and/or syringes
- Always clean and cover sores and open wounds
- Get vaccinated
- Health care workers, public safety workers, and those who may be exposed to another person’s bodily fluids should follow all routine barrier and safety precautions
- During pregnancy, get a blood test for Hepatitis B. This virus can be transmitted from an infected mother to her baby during delivery.

Hepatitis A vaccine
The Hepatitis A vaccine is given in two doses 6 to 18 months apart. The vaccine is recommended for the following:

- Travelers to areas with increased rates of Hepatitis A
- Sexually active people, especially men who have sex with men
- Street drug users
- Persons with clotting-factor disorders (e.g., hemophilia)
- Persons with chronic liver disease
- Children living in areas with increased rates of Hepatitis A (required in Oklahoma)

Hepatitis B vaccine
The Hepatitis B vaccine is recommended as part of the routine schedule of childhood immunizations and is also recommended for adults in the high risk groups. High risk groups:

- Persons with occupational risk (i.e., health care workers, public safety workers)
- Sex partners and house-mates of HBV carriers
- Travelers to areas with a high incidence of HBV
- Street drug users
- Sexually active people
- Hemodialysis patients

Where can I go to receive a hepatitis vaccine?
Ask your health care provider about receiving the Hepatitis A and B vaccines.

Vaccines are available at OU Health Services. For more information call 325-4611, ext 41112.

References
- www.cdc.gov (Centers for Disease Control)
- www.who.int/en (World Health Organization)
- www.mayoclinic.com (Mayo Clinic)