

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a viral disease that affects the liver. Anyone can be infected with hepatitis A if they come in direct contact with food, drinks or objects contaminated by the faeces of an infected person. There have also been outbreaks associated with eating contaminated shellfish, and among particular groups including injecting drug users and gay men. Hepatitis A is also common in developing countries where hygiene standards are poor. Symptoms may last for several weeks but full recovery is usual.

Outbreaks have also occurred in childcare centres. This is because children under five years of age often don't show any symptoms but can infect childcare workers or other children, especially if care is not taken during nappy changing. The first sign of an outbreak is usually when a parent or childcare worker gets sick.

Hepatitis A, B and C are different

One infection of hepatitis A will give you lifelong protection. Remember, though, that hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C are caused by different viruses, are spread in different ways and have different treatments. This means that prior infection with one type won't offer any immunity against the others.

Symptoms of hepatitis A

You can fall ill any time between 15 and 50 days after catching the virus, with the average incubation period being 28 days. Many infected people, particularly children less than five years old, show few or no symptoms. For older children and adults, the symptoms include:

- Fever
- Nausea
- Abdominal discomfort
- Dark urine
- Yellow skin and eyes (jaundice).

Symptoms may last for several weeks but full recovery is usual.

The disease is infectious

Hepatitis A is caused by a virus. It is spread when taken in by mouth, which can happen when hands, foods or other items are contaminated with the faeces of a person with hepatitis A. The disease can also be spread sexually by oral-anal contact. A person with hepatitis A is infectious from two weeks prior to showing symptoms to one week after they become jaundiced.

Strict hygiene is important

To reduce your risk of catching hepatitis A, you should:

- Wash your hands with soap and hot running water before handling food, after going to the toilet and after handling used condoms or having contact with the anal area of another person.
- Clean bathrooms and toilets often, paying attention to toilet seats, handles, taps and nappy change tables.
- Boil your drinking water if it comes from an untreated source, such as a river.

You can be immunised

Immunisation against hepatitis A includes a course of injections over six to 12 months. Hepatitis A immunisation is a good idea for people travelling to places where the disease is common, or to places where hygiene standards are poor.

The vaccine is also recommended for some particular groups of people, including:

- People who work with children
- Men who have sex with men
- People with liver problems
- Food handlers
- Injecting drug users.

Overseas travel

People travelling overseas, particularly to developing countries, need to take special care to avoid hepatitis A. Before travelling, talk to your doctor about protection.

Careful selection and preparation of food and drink is vital:

- If you cannot peel it or boil it, leave it alone.
- Don't eat uncooked foods, particularly vegetables and fruit which cannot be peeled before eating, shellfish or unpackaged drinks or ice.

Type of help available

Hepatitis A can be diagnosed with a blood test. There is no specific treatment, but your doctor can help prevent the disease from spreading to other family members and other close contacts by offering them an injection of immunoglobulin. This injection must be given within 10 days of contact. It can prevent hepatitis A from developing or at least reduce the severity of the symptoms.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local travel health clinic
- National Immunisation Infoline Tel. 1800 671 811

Things to remember

- Hepatitis A is a viral disease that affects the liver.
- Hepatitis A, B and C are caused by different viruses so catching one doesn't offer immunity against the others.
- Children under five years of age often don't show symptoms.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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