

Increase in hepatitis (liver inflammation) cases in children

Information for parents

Since January 2022, an increase in the number of children with acute (sudden onset) hepatitis has been detected in the UK. Most of these children are under 10 years old.

Hepatitis is a condition involving inflammation of the liver and may occur for a number of reasons, including several viral infections. In the recently affected children, the viruses that normally cause hepatitis (hepatitis viruses A to E) have not been found. To date, other possible causes of acute hepatitis, including some medications and toxins, have not been identified either but are also being investigated (see more below). The Public Health Agency (PHA) is working with the UK Health Security Agency, NHS and other public health colleagues across the UK to identify the cause as soon as possible.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

Hepatitis symptoms include:

- yellowing of the white part of the eyes or skin (jaundice)
see www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/jaundice
- dark urine
- pale, grey-coloured faeces (poo)
- itchy skin
- muscle and joint pain
- a high temperature
- feeling and being sick
- feeling unusually tired all the time
- loss of appetite
- tummy pain

If your child is unwell, develops jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin), or is getting worse and/or you are worried about them, you should contact your GP or other healthcare professional, GP out-of-hours or your nearest Emergency Department.

What age group is most at risk?

Almost all of the children identified in the UK have been under 10 years of age, with most aged between 2 and 5 years. Most children affected were previously healthy, and only a very small number are linked to another case of hepatitis. This means that even if there has been someone with hepatitis among your family or friends, or at your child's nursery or school, your child is still at low risk.

What is causing the increase in acute hepatitis in children?

As the usual causes of infectious hepatitis have not been found in the recent cases in children, public health teams are looking at all other possible causes. Some of the children have tested positive for adenovirus, and therefore this is being considered, along with other possible causes.

What is adenovirus infection?

Adenoviruses are a family of very common viruses that cause a range of mild illnesses such as colds, vomiting, and diarrhoea. Adenovirus infections are very common in young children, and while they don't typically cause hepatitis, it can be a very rare complication of some types of adenovirus infection.

What do I need to do if my child is unwell with symptoms of adenovirus or a viral illness?

If your child develops the common mild symptoms that could be due to adenovirus infection, such as mild respiratory symptoms, vomiting, or diarrhoea, the chance of them developing hepatitis is extremely low.

Children who are unwell should be kept at home and not be sent to school or nursery. Children who have experienced symptoms of a gastrointestinal infection including vomiting and diarrhoea should stay off school or nursery until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

If you are concerned about your child or you feel they are very unwell (for example, if they have breathing difficulties or are not eating or drinking), getting worse, or if they develop jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin), you should seek medical advice by contacting your GP, GP out-of-hours service or Emergency Department.

How do I prevent the spread of common childhood viral infections including adenovirus?

Childhood infections are commonly passed from person to person through close contact, coughing and sneezing, or by touching contaminated surfaces.

The best way to reduce the spread of infections is to practise good hand and respiratory hygiene. Cover your nose and mouth when you cough and sneeze, dispose of the tissue and wash your hands regularly. Supervise thorough handwashing in younger children and make sure they also use a tissue when they cough or sneeze and dispose of it afterwards.



Is there a link between the cases and COVID-19 infection or the COVID-19 vaccine?

Some of the children with acute hepatitis have recently had a COVID-19 infection, but as there have been a high number of COVID-19 infections in this age group recently, this is not unexpected.

There is **no link between these hepatitis cases and the COVID-19 vaccine**. The majority of cases are under the age of 5 years, and these children do not receive the COVID-19 vaccine. No confirmed cases in the UK have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

Where can I find more information?

If your child is affected by liver disease, the Children's Liver Disease Foundation (CLDF) provides support services for families and encourages you to get in touch. Further information can be found on their website: <https://childliverdisease.org/parents> You can also contact the CLDF Families Team on 0121 212 6023 or 07533 092801, by email at families@childliverdisease.org or via Facebook.

Further information on the investigation of the cases in the UK is available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/increase-in-hepatitis-liver-inflammation-cases-in-children-under-investigation



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