

Hepatitis A

Factsheet for patients

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a disease caused by the hepatitis A virus, which affects the liver. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver, and viruses are a common cause.

The illness may start with fever, feeling generally unwell, tummy pain, feeling sick, and flu-like symptoms. Some people may notice yellow discolouration of the whites of the eyes and of the skin (jaundice).

As some people can be very unwell, anyone who has symptoms should speak to their GP. Older people tend to have more severe symptoms, while young children may have fewer symptoms.

How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread by contact with the virus, which can be passed accidentally to your mouth by:

- eating food prepared by someone with the infection who hasn't washed their hands properly, or washed them in water contaminated with sewage;
- drinking contaminated water (including ice cubes);
- eating raw or undercooked shellfish from contaminated water;
- being in close contact with someone who has hepatitis A;

- having sex with someone who has the infection (of particular risk to gay or bisexual men who have sex with men);
- injecting drugs using contaminated equipment.

Hepatitis A is most commonly spread from person to person. People are infectious for two weeks before becoming ill and can remain infectious until about a week after jaundice appears. Children without symptoms may be infectious for several weeks longer. Spread within households is very common.

People travelling abroad to countries where sanitation is poor are also at risk of becoming infected.

What can I do to prevent getting hepatitis A?

The most important step to prevent the spread of infection is washing your hands thoroughly with soap and water at these key times:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after using or cleaning the toilet;
- after attending anyone with diarrhoea or vomiting;
- after touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting;
- after changing a baby's nappy.

Toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins should be kept clean, with household disinfectants.

People travelling abroad to countries where sanitation is poor are at risk of becoming infected. A vaccine against hepatitis A is available through travel health clinics before visiting countries where hepatitis A is common.

The hepatitis A vaccine may also be offered to close contacts of people with the infection, to prevent spread of infection.

Is there treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A.

The hepatitis A vaccine is usually offered to people living in the same household, who do not have the infection.

While infected, we advise avoiding alcohol during illness and recovery.

Always contact your doctor if any of the following apply:

- your symptoms are severe or do not improve after a few days;
- you have a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over;
- you have symptoms of severe dehydration, such as sunken eyes and passing small quantities of dark, strong smelling urine;
- you have a baby with symptoms;
- you have an immune system that is not working properly.

Do I need to stay of school or work?

Yes. You are infectious for two weeks before becoming unwell and for about a week after you develop jaundice or other symptoms.

You should tell your employer you have an infection if you work with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young, those in poor health, or if you handle food.

A person can generally return to their work/ school roughly seven days after the illness begins if they feel well enough.



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