

## What is hepatitis E?

Hepatitis E infection is caused by the Hepatitis E virus that causes inflammation of the liver (known as hepatitis).

In a lot of people, hepatitis E can cause no symptoms at all or it can present as a mild illness. In rare cases, it can be serious.

Symptoms usually resolve in 1 to 6 weeks. As some people can become very unwell, anyone who has symptoms should speak to their GP.

## How can I tell if I have been infected by hepatitis E?

Many people infected with hepatitis E will not have any symptoms. Symptoms can include yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), darkening of the urine and pale poo, which may be accompanied by tiredness, fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal or tummy pain, and loss of appetite. The symptoms will usually resolve within a few weeks. In individuals who are immunosuppressed (have a weakened immune system), symptoms may be less obvious. A blood test can be undertaken to confirm infection with hepatitis E.

## How common is hepatitis E?

Certain types of hepatitis E are more commonly associated with regions of the world where sanitation is poor. There have been increasingly frequent reports of hepatitis E identified in people who have not travelled abroad. These figures are likely to be under-estimated.

## How is hepatitis E infection spread?

Hepatitis E is present in the faeces (poo) of infected humans and animals.

The most common way people are thought to become infected with hepatitis E in the UK, is by eating raw or undercooked meat (including pork or pig meat, and game).

In parts of the world where sanitation is poor, the virus can be spread through consumption of food or water contaminated by the faeces of infected animals, or by human sewage. This can include crops washed with contaminated water and shellfish that live in contaminated water.

People who work with animals have a higher risk of contracting hepatitis E.

Person to person spread is very rare. There have been some reports of human transmission associated with contact with human poo, such as people who work with sewage and healthcare workers, through sexual contact with higher risk in gay or bisexual men who have sex with men (GBMSM), blood transfusion and organ transplantation.

## How do I reduce my risk of getting hepatitis E infection?

Currently, there is no licensed vaccine for hepatitis E in the UK.

Practising good hand hygiene, and washing your hands thoroughly with soap and water especially at these key times, can reduce your risk of infection:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after using or cleaning the toilet;
- after attending anyone with diarrhoea;
- after touching animals.

It is important to also make sure that food containing pig meat (especially sausages) is thoroughly cooked until steaming hot throughout, and the meat is no longer pink and juices run clear.

You should avoid the consumption of any raw or undercooked meat and shellfish.

When travelling to countries with poor sanitation, it is advisable to drink bottled water, including water used for brushing teeth, avoiding ice in drinks and uncooked foods that may have been washed in contaminated water (such as salad products).

### **Are there particular risks associated with hepatitis E?**

Most people will not be seriously unwell with hepatitis E, and many may not even know that they have had it. There are some people who may be at a greater risk of serious or prolonged illness. In the most severe cases, hepatitis E can lead to liver failure or death.

Those who have a weakened immune system (for example because of a medical condition or medications), pregnant women, older people, and people with chronic or existing liver disease can experience more severe infections. These people should be monitored more closely in case the infection affects their liver function.

### **Is there treatment for hepatitis E?**

For most people, there is no treatment needed and the infection will clear on its own. If your immune system is working normally, your body should get rid of the virus within a few weeks. If your liver is healthy, it should repair any damage caused by the virus.

While infected, alcohol should be avoided during illness and recovery. Pregnant women should seek advice from their antenatal carer.

Older people, people with liver problems, and people whose immune system doesn't work properly, may require blood tests in case the infection affects their liver function.

During the first two weeks of hepatitis E illness, you should:

- avoid preparing food for others;
- limit contact with others if possible, especially pregnant women, immunosuppressed or people with liver problems;
- always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.



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