

# Hepatitis A

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus. People who get sick with hepatitis A can have fever, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort and feel unwell. A few days later, their skin and the whites of their eyes may become a yellow colour - a condition called jaundice. Recovery often takes 4-6 weeks but can take months. Some people will have no symptoms at all. Many infants and young children infected with hepatitis A do not have any symptoms. The infection can be more serious in adults.

Hepatitis A infection rarely results in long term liver damage. For people with a chronic liver infection such as hepatitis B or C, hepatitis A infection can be more serious.

## How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread by the fecal-oral route, which means that infected feces (stool) gets into the mouth of another person making them sick. This happens by eating food (including improperly cooked or raw seafood/shellfish), drinking water contaminated with the hepatitis A virus, living in the same house, or having sex with an infected person. Food and water is contaminated more often in countries where hepatitis A is common so travel-related cases can occur.

People living in the same house and using the same bathroom as the sick person can get sick themselves. People with hepatitis A can pass the virus to others if they do not wash their hands after having a bowel movement or before preparing food for others. In childcare centres, hepatitis A can spread from an infected child during diaper changing or by contamination of toys and objects that other children then put in their mouths. Infection can be spread by sex practices involving contact between the anal area and the mouth.

## What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no medication to treat hepatitis A. If you are sick you should stay home and rest until you feel better. Avoid alcohol for a few months to give your liver time to heal itself. Once you have recovered, your body will make protective substances called antibodies which will prevent you from getting infected again with hepatitis A for the rest of your life. You should wait at least six months before donating blood, and you may be asked by Canadian Blood Services to provide laboratory documentation.

...Over

[www.healthunit.com](http://www.healthunit.com)

## **What should I do if I have been exposed to someone with hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A infection can be prevented in people one year of age or older by getting a dose of hepatitis A vaccine as soon as possible after exposure. A second dose should be given 6 to 12 months later to make sure you develop long-term protection against the hepatitis A virus. Infants less than one year of age and people with weak immune systems should receive a single injection of serum immune globulin, which contains antibodies that give immediate protection against the hepatitis A virus.

These measures should be considered for people living in the same household as the ill person, and for sex contacts.

## **How can I prevent hepatitis A?**

**Good hand washing** with soap and water after using the bathroom is the best way to prevent the spread of hepatitis A. Alcohol based hand sanitizers, containing at least 60% alcohol, are good especially if soap and water is not available.

Proper food preparation techniques are also very important for preventing hepatitis A. Food should be cooked properly and served at appropriate temperatures. Raw meat should not come in contact with other foods. Drinking water should come from a safe supply and milk should be pasteurized. People with hepatitis A infection should not prepare food for others.

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for people travelling to places where this infection is more common and for people who have a chronic liver disease like hepatitis B or hepatitis C. It is also recommended for men who have sex with men and people who use injection drugs because they are at increased risk for hepatitis A infection. Long lasting protection happens with two injections over a 6 to 12 month period. Vaccination is available at the Immunization Clinic of the Middlesex-London Health Unit. The vaccine is free for high risk individuals; travelers must pay \$65.00 per injection.

**For more information contact the Communicable Disease Division at (519) 663-5317 ext. 2330 [www.healthunit.com](http://www.healthunit.com)**

### References:

Heymann, D.L. (2008). Control of Communicable Diseases Manual (19<sup>th</sup> ed.) Washington, D.C.: American Public Health Association.

Canadian Liver Foundation "Hepatitis A\_" Retrieved from [www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca) February 2013

National Advisory Committee on Immunization. Canadian Immunization Guide. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Ottawa, Ont.: Health Canada 2006. (Ministry of Public Works & Government Services Canada, Cat. No. H40-19392-2.

Reviewed February 2013