

## **What is Hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by a virus. It is only found in man and other primates. Cases are more common in the autumn and winter.

## **How do I know that I have Hepatitis A?**

Hepatitis A is usually confirmed by laboratory examination of a blood, faeces (stool) and/or a urine sample provided at the request of your GP

## **How is it spread?**

The virus is found in the blood, faeces and urine of infected persons. Infected people who do not wash and dry their hands properly after using the toilet are the main cause of transmission. This allows the virus to be passed on when preparing food for others or through hand-to-hand contact. It therefore spreads particularly easily amongst children.

In countries where sanitation is poor the rivers, lakes or even the water supply may be contaminated. Hepatitis A can then be caught from:

- cold foods, such as salads, which are washed before serving
- fruit and vegetables which have been watered
- shellfish from contaminated waters
- ice or water from the public supply

Hepatitis A can also be spread during sexual contact with anyone who is infectious, and by the sharing of needles used by those injecting drugs.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Many of those who are infected, especially young children, may show no symptoms. The severity of the disease usually increases with age.

The first symptoms are often tiredness, weakness, muscle pains and headaches. Shortly after this loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain may occur. These can be followed by jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin) and often dark urine, pale faeces and a mild fever.

The infection generally lasts for up to 2 weeks after symptoms show. Most people usually recover unaided. Full recovery usually takes less than 4 weeks, depending on the person's general state of health. In rare severe cases recovery may take several months. Fatigue and intolerance of fat or alcohol may last for months. Tiredness is usually the last symptom to

disappear. Rest is recommended when the symptoms are most severe and alcohol should be avoided.

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

Usually between 15 and 50 days after exposure depending on the dose of the infection. The average is 28-30 days.

## **How long is a person able to spread the virus?**

The Hepatitis A virus is shed in the faeces of an infected person for two weeks before symptoms occur, during the first week of illness and for one week after the start of any jaundice.

## **Do infected people need to stay away from work or school?**

Hepatitis A is very infectious. All cases must stay away from work, school, playgroups or nurseries until 7 days after the start of symptoms. If jaundice develops this exclusion must be extended for 7 days from its onset. Inform your employer, child carer, nursery or school as soon as possible to help them identify if they may have an outbreak.

In exceptional circumstances, food handlers not yet showing symptoms may be asked to stop work with unwrapped or ready to eat food.

Your doctor may advise that family members are immunised against Hepatitis A to prevent further spread of the illness in the household.

## **How can I prevent it spreading?**

Handwashing is the most important factor in preventing the spread of infection. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap in warm running water:

- AFTER using or cleaning the toilet
- AFTER touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting
- AFTER attending to anybody who is unwell
- AFTER handling dirty laundry, clothing or bedding
- AFTER handling used nappies
- AFTER sexual contact with an infected person
- BEFORE handling, preparing, serving, or consuming food or drink

People who are ill should ideally use bactericidal liquid soap and separate towels or disposable paper tissues. A nailbrush can assist you to clean under your fingernails. Always dry your hands well as this helps to remove contamination.

### **What precautions should I take when travelling abroad?**

Hepatitis A is found world-wide, but is most common in countries where sanitation is poor. Seek medical advice from your GP at least one month before travelling to 'high risk' areas such as Africa, the Middle East, Asia, or Central and South America. Ask your GP about vaccination against hepatitis A. People visiting these destinations should:

- drink only boiled or bottled water
- use boiled or bottled water for brushing your teeth
- avoid food stored or prepared in unhygienic conditions
- avoid ice in drinks, home-made ice cream, salads and shellfish
- wash fruit (in bottled or boiled water) and peel before eating
- always wash your hands before meals and after going to the toilet
- ensure you follow instructions carefully if you are using water sterilisation tablets

### **REMEMBER TO WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY**

**Further advice is available by contacting your Doctor or from:**

Cambridge City Council  
Environmental Health & Waste Strategy  
Mandela House  
4 Regent Street  
Cambridge  
CB2 1BY

Tel: 01223 457900

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## **Cambridge City Council**

## **HEPATITIS A**

**YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED**