

Hepatitis A Vaccine Information Sheet

What is hepatitis A disease?

Hepatitis A disease is an infection of the liver caused by a virus. Hepatitis A disease occurs in Canada and all over the world. It is very common, or endemic, in many parts of the world.

Most people who get hepatitis A disease recover in about one month but sometimes it can take 6 to 12 months to get better. In rare cases, the illness can be severe enough to cause death. Persons with a history of chronic liver disease are more likely to have severe illness. Once a person has recovered from hepatitis A disease they are protected from getting the infection again.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The virus is most commonly found in the stool of the infected person. It is spread through contaminated food or water. Thorough hand washing after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before handling food can prevent the spread of hepatitis A (fecal-oral route).

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A infection?

The symptoms can vary from person to person. Some people, especially young children, may get hepatitis A infection without noticing any symptoms. The symptoms appear slowly and may include:

- tiredness
- poor appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pain
- fever
- dark coloured urine (tea-coloured), pale, light coloured stools
- yellowing of eyes and skin (jaundice)

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Hepatitis A vaccine, however, is very effective in preventing infection. The series consists of two injections given 6 to 12 months apart. About three weeks after one dose of the vaccine 99% of people will have protection lasting for about one year. After the second dose, the protection lasts 20 years or more.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. In Canada, vaccines must undergo laboratory and field testing. They must pass a strict licensing procedure with the federal government before they can be used. Once the vaccine has been approved for use, every lot is tested for safety and quality. A person cannot get hepatitis A disease from the vaccine that is used in Alberta and Canada.

Who should get the vaccine?

- People who are at greater risk for complications from hepatitis A infection because of specific medical conditions.
- People with lifestyle risks for getting the hepatitis A virus.
- Household or close contacts of children adopted from hepatitis A endemic countries.
- People who have been exposed to an acute case of hepatitis A. Vaccine must be given within a specific time frame to be effective.
- Travelers to countries where hepatitis A disease is common (endemic). Vaccine must be purchased as it is not provincially-funded for travelers.
- Those who live in, or work with, communities of individuals with high rates of hepatitis A or workers with a specific occupational risk.

Talk to your public health nurse or health care provider for more information.

Who should not have the vaccine?

Hepatitis A vaccine should not be given to people who:

- have a history of severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to hepatitis A vaccine
- have had a severe reaction to this vaccine or any component of the vaccine
- are children younger than 1 year of age, except those individuals with very specific medical conditions.

What are the possible side effects to the vaccine?

Most people have little or no reaction to this vaccine. Reactions that do occur are usually mild, such as redness, tenderness or swelling where the needle was given. Occasionally, headache and mild fever may occur. Reactions usually disappear in 24 to 48 hours.

As with any immunization, unexpected or unusual side effects can happen. This includes severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

What should you do if you have a reaction to the vaccine?

- Apply a cool moist cloth on the area where the needle was given to reduce the pain and swelling
- Take a medication such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) to reduce the pain, fever or discomfort.
 - Aspirin® (ASA) is not recommended for individuals under 19 years of age.
- Report any unusual reactions to Health Link Alberta

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at:

- 403-943-5465 in Calgary
- 780-408-5465 in Edmonton
- Toll free 1-866-408-5465 elsewhere in Alberta

Or visit www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca for health information online.

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