

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A disease?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by a virus. It is common in most parts of the developing world. The majority of people who get hepatitis A disease recover in about one month, however in some cases it can take 6 months to a year. In rare instances, the illness can be severe enough to cause death. People with a history of chronic liver disease are more likely to have a severe form of the 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 found mostly in the stool of the infected person. It is most often spread through direct contact with an infected person or indirectly by ingestion of contaminated food or water. People who prepare food can spread the disease if they are infected with the virus and don't wash their hands properly (fecal-oral route).

What are the symptoms of infection?

The symptoms for one person can be different than for another. Some people, especially young children, may get hepatitis A infection without noticing any symptoms. The first symptoms noticed may include:

- tiredness
- poor appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pain
- fever
- Followed in a few days by:
 - dark-coloured urine
 - light-coloured stools
 - yellowing of eyes and skin (jaundice)

Persons with these symptoms should contact their physician or contact HealthLink Alberta, at 780-408-LINK (5465) or at the toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465).

How long does the illness last?

Illness usually lasts about two weeks but can last for several months. Illness is more severe in individuals who already have liver disease. People can be infectious from one to two weeks before until at least one week after symptoms begin.

Can hepatitis A be treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. However, it can be prevented with the use of hepatitis A vaccine.

How is hepatitis A different from hepatitis B and C?

Hepatitis A is spread through direct contact with an infected person or by eating or drinking contaminated food or water.

Hepatitis B can be spread through contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person.

Hepatitis C is spread mainly by direct contact with the blood of an infected person.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

Hepatitis A can be prevented by vaccination with two doses of hepatitis A vaccine. This vaccine is very effective in preventing hepatitis A infection. The series consists of two injections given 6 to 12 months apart. About three weeks after the first dose of the vaccine, 99 percent of people will have protection lasting for about one year. After the second dose, the protection lasts at least 20 years. It is also important to wash hands well with soap and warm water before preparing foods or drinks or before eating or drinking.

Is the hepatitis A vaccine safe?

Yes. You cannot get hepatitis A disease from the vaccine.

What are the possible side effects from hepatitis A 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 are gone in 24 to 48 hours. As with any vaccination, unexpected or unusual side effects such as a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) can occur. Such serious reactions are very rare.