

HEPATITIS A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by a virus (germ). It can be a very mild illness in some people, especially young children. In other people, it can be severe enough to cause death. Hepatitis A is also called "infectious hepatitis" because it spreads more easily from one person to another than other types of hepatitis.

What are the symptoms?

Persons with mild illness may have no symptoms at all. When symptoms do occur, they often begin suddenly with fever, tiredness, poor appetite, nausea and abdominal pain. A few days to a week later, the urine may become dark, the stools may become light in colour, and the eyes and skin may become yellow (jaundice). Some people, especially young children, do not become jaundiced when they have hepatitis A.

There are several kinds of hepatitis and the symptoms are very similar for all of them. Because of this, a blood test is needed to tell if a person has hepatitis A.

The illness usually lasts 2 to 3 weeks but it takes some people several months to get better.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The virus that causes hepatitis A is found mostly in the stools of the infected person. It is most often spread through food or water contaminated with the virus. People who prepare food can spread the disease if they are infected with the virus and do not wash their hands properly. The germ can get on to the hands if the hands accidentally touch the stool (e.g. when having a bowel movement, changing a diaper or helping a child use the toilet). From the hands, the germs can be spread to other things such as food. When another person eats the food or drinks the water contaminated with the hepatitis A virus, they can become ill with the disease. Small amounts of the virus can also be found in some body fluids such as saliva. Therefore, it may be possible that sharing articles that contain saliva, such as toothbrushes, eating utensils or drinking containers, can also spread the disease. Long periods of close contact with someone who has hepatitis A (e.g. in a household or daycare) increases the chance for spreading the disease.

A person with hepatitis A can spread the germ to others as early as 1 to 2 weeks before they feel sick and up to 1 week after the illness starts.

How soon do symptoms of hepatitis A appear?

Symptoms may appear 15 to 50 days after the virus enters the body. Most often it takes about one month for the symptoms to develop.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, however once a person has had hepatitis A, they usually cannot get it again. Travellers to developing countries are at higher risk of being exposed to hepatitis A virus because of poor sanitary conditions.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Measures can be taken to manage the symptoms and reduce stress on the liver. A person with hepatitis A is usually very tired; therefore a lot of rest is needed. Frequent small bland meals may help the nausea and poor appetite. Check with your family doctor before taking any medications (prescription, over the counter, herbal). Fatty foods, alcohol and caffeine should be avoided for the duration of the illness to reduce stress on the liver. The skin may be itchy if jaundice is present. Taking a bath in lukewarm water that contain ½ cup of baking soda or 1 cup uncooked oatmeal can relieve the itching.

How can the spread of hepatitis A be prevented?

Basic hygiene is **very important** in **preventing the spread** of hepatitis A. Always wash your hands after using the toilet, helping another person with toileting, or changing a diaper, and before preparing or eating food. Children should also be taught to wash their hands at these times. Articles that may contain saliva, such as eating utensils, drinking containers, and toothbrushes, should not be shared.

Hepatitis A vaccine is very effective in preventing hepatitis A infection. The vaccine series consists of two doses given 6 to 12 months apart. About three weeks after the first dose of vaccine 99% of people will have protection lasting for about one year. After the second dose, the protection lasts 20 years or more.

What should you do if you are in contact with hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a serious illness that must be reported to Alberta Health Services, Health Protection. If you are in contact with hepatitis A call a Public Health Centre or Health Link Alberta for information. Hepatitis A vaccine and/or immune globulin can be given to protect you against hepatitis A. These must be given within a specific time frame to be effective. Not everyone who has had contact with someone who is ill with hepatitis A needs these injections. The nurse can tell you if any of these injections will benefit you.

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at 780-408-LINK (5465) or outside the local calling area, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK. Visit www.albertahealthservices.ca for health information online.

