

# HEPATITIS A

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 hepatitisACT

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## A liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis A virus.

### Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is an acute (short term illness, but quite severe) infection of the liver which is caused by the hepatitis A virus.

Hepatitis A can survive in the environment (e.g. on hands) for several hours and considerably longer in food that is kept at room temperature and is relatively resistant to detergents.

Hepatitis A is encountered worldwide. In developing countries most people are infected during childhood due to poor sanitation. Most people in developed countries reach adulthood without being exposed to the virus.

In Australia, hepatitis A infection is more likely in particular locations and amongst specific groups including:

- Child daycare centres,
- Men who have sex with men,
- People who inject drugs,
- Residential facilities for people with intellectual disabilities, and
- Travellers to other countries where hepatitis A is common.

Infection resulting from contaminated food or water, or an infected food handler is uncommon in Australia.

### Transmission

Hepatitis A is spread by faecal oral contamination and may occur when anything that has been exposed to infected faeces is put in the mouth, for example:

- Food, liquid or eating utensils can transmit the virus from an infected person, and
- Direct contact (including sexual) with an infectious person.

Hepatitis A can be transmitted up to two weeks before onset of symptoms, and people with hepatitis A should be considered infectious for a week after the onset of jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin).

### Prevention

To avoid hepatitis A infection:

- Consider being vaccinated,
- Always wash hands thoroughly after toilet visits and handling soiled linen (e.g. nappies) and before preparing and eating food,
- Avoid sharing food, cutlery, crockery, cigarettes and drinks with other people,



- When travelling to countries with poor sanitation, drink bottled water and avoid eating food prepared in contaminated water, and
- In a natural disaster, listen to warnings about contaminated drinking water and follow instructions by relevant authorities.

## Testing

Diagnosis is based on patient symptoms and confirmed by a blood test. Incubation (time from exposure to symptoms) varies from 15 - 50 days.

## Symptoms

Infants and young children infected with hepatitis A rarely show any symptoms or only show mild symptoms.

The majority of adults will show symptoms which may include:

- Fever,
- Weakness,
- Fatigue,
- Nausea,
- Loss of appetite,
- Joint aches and pains,
- Vomiting, and
- Jaundice.

The duration of illness varies and most people feel better, and their liver function tests (LFTs) normalise, a month after the onset of infection.

Death from hepatitis A is very rare but is more common in people with pre existing liver damage including people with chronic hepatitis B or C, and people who are over 50 years of age.

## Treatment

- There is no treatment for hepatitis A.
- Rest and adequate fluid intake is recommended.
- Alcohol should be avoided.

## Vaccination

Vaccination is available for people over the aged two years and over and provides long term protection.

Immunity status should be checked by your doctor every ten years.

The Australian immunisation Handbook recommends hepatitis A vaccinations for:

- People who travel to countries where hepatitis A is common,
- All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between 18 months and 6 years,
- Workers in remote and rural Indigenous communities,
- Child daycare and preschool staff,
- Health care workers,
- Sewage workers,
- Men who have sex with men,
- People who inject drugs,
- People with chronic liver disease, and
- People with haemophilia.

People who are at risk of contracting hepatitis A and B should be vaccinated for both hepatitis A and B.

People living with hepatitis C should be vaccinated for both hepatitis A and B.

Pregnant women should defer vaccination until after the birth, unless they are at elevated risk of hepatitis A infection.

People who are in close household contact or sexual relationship with someone who has hepatitis A should receive immunoglobulin within two weeks of exposure.

