

# Hepatitis A

## A vaccine-preventable disease

### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A virus (HAV) is one of several viruses that infect and cause inflammation of the liver, or 'hepatitis'. Each year, 1.4 million people worldwide are diagnosed with hepatitis A. Most people develop a short-term illness and recover, as it does not cause long-term infection.

### How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread through close contact with an infected person, or by eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated with faeces (poo) that contains the virus. It usually takes about 28 days after becoming infected to start feeling unwell, although it can range from 15 to 50 days. The risk of catching hepatitis A varies between and within countries depending on sanitary conditions. Lower- and middle-income countries with poor sanitation and hygiene facilities have higher rates of infection (with 90% of children infected in some countries) than high-income countries with good water treatment and sanitation.

High-risk settings for catching hepatitis A include childcare centres, shared residential settings and prisons. Men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs are also at high risk for hepatitis A infection.

If you catch hepatitis A, at first you might experience general symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, loss of appetite or fever. After a few days to a week, you might develop yellow colouring of the skin and eyes, called 'jaundice', along with dark urine and pale-coloured faeces (poo). However, some people, especially children, do not have any symptoms at all.

If your doctor suspects that you have caught hepatitis A, they will arrange a blood test to look for antibodies against the hepatitis A virus in your blood. They will also test your liver function to look for liver inflammation. 'IgM'



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antibodies against the virus suggest current or recent infection, while 'IgG' antibodies suggest past infection, including previous infection as a child. Hepatitis A vaccination will also give you positive IgG antibodies in your blood, meaning that you are immune to the virus. Other testing to detect the virus, such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR), is also available in some laboratories.

### Can I be infected with hepatitis A again?

No. Once you are infected with the hepatitis A virus, you become immune and can't get infected again. However, sometimes the virus can flare up and your symptoms can come back, particularly during the first 6 months after infection.

### How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. People rarely need to go to hospital for it but, if they do, it is mostly for supportive treatment, such as fluids and medications to treat nausea. Most people feel unwell for only 1 or 2 weeks, although some may take months to recover fully. It is important to avoid unnecessary medication and alcohol during this time, as these can affect your liver while it is recovering.

## Can I get chronic liver damage from catching hepatitis A?

No. Unlike hepatitis B and C viruses, hepatitis A virus does not cause chronic liver damage.

## Who is most at risk of infection and who should be vaccinated?

- People who travel to low- and middle-income countries
- Childcare workers
- Men who have sex with men
- People who live in institutions or group homes
- Sewerage workers
- Healthcare workers
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

## How can I protect myself from Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A infection can be prevented by an effective vaccine that is available through your doctor. If you think you may be at risk, talk to your doctor about the vaccine, particularly if you are planning to travel to Asia, Africa or another area with high rates of hepatitis A.

As well as vaccination, you can protect yourself when travelling to high-risk countries by avoiding unclean food or water. Only drink bottled water or water that has been boiled or disinfected. Avoid raw or undercooked meat or seafood, unwashed or unpeeled raw fruit or vegetables (including salads) and ice made from tap water.

Always wash your hands after going to the toilet and practise good personal hygiene, particularly if you work in a high-risk environment for hepatitis A, such as a childcare centre or residential institution.

At the global level, reducing the spread of hepatitis A relies on improving sanitation (safe disposal of sewage), good food safety practices and providing clean drinking water.

## What if someone I know gets hepatitis A?

When someone becomes sick with hepatitis A, they have usually been passing virus in their faeces (poo) for up to 2 weeks. If you have been in close contact with them during this time, you may have caught the virus but may not feel sick yet. This includes if you are a family member, a household contact, a sexual partner or you ate food prepared by the person with hepatitis A.

If you think you may be a close contact, see your doctor straight away, so they can offer you vaccination or injection with hepatitis A antibody to protect you. Both are effective, but vaccination is now preferred for people aged under 40 years.

### Acknowledgements

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