

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The most common cause is being infected with a virus. There are several viruses that can infect the liver, and hepatitis A is one of them.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The incubation period is 2 to 6 weeks, which means the gap between catching the virus and becoming ill is 2 to 6 weeks.

The symptoms include:

- loss of appetite, nausea, aching muscles and joints, and a mild fever
- jaundice (skin and whites of the eyes become yellow) and dark coloured urine

Some people, especially children, have only a mild illness. They may not know they have hepatitis A, though they are still infectious to others.

How does it spread?

Hepatitis A virus is present in the faeces of an infected person, so it can be passed on by contact with an infected person's faeces as a result of poor hygiene.

In countries such as the UK where sanitation is good hepatitis A has become uncommon. There is a higher risk in Africa, Asia, parts of Eastern Europe and parts of the Middle East.

The virus can survive in water for up to 10 months, so shellfish harvested from water where there is sewage may be infected. Water, salad and fruit can also be contaminated in countries where sanitation is poor.

How can infection be prevented?

- Good standards of personal hygiene are important, particularly washing hands after using the toilet
- Shellfish should be steamed for at least 90 seconds or heated at 85-90°C before eating
- People travelling to countries where there is higher risk of hepatitis A should be immunised. Ensure you arrange this with your general practice several weeks before travelling. See: www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk
- When travelling abroad select foods that are cooked and served hot. Avoid raw fruit and vegetables that have not been cooked or peeled, such as salads.

How should hands be washed?

Always use warm, running water and a mild, preferably liquid, soap. (It is not necessary to use soaps labelled as antiseptic or antibacterial.)

- Wet hands and apply a small amount of soap
- Rub hands together vigorously for 10-15 seconds
- Pay special attention to areas between fingers, finger tips, and palms.
- Rinse hands under warm running water
- Dry thoroughly on a clean dry towel.

How are infections treated?

There is no specific treatment. Symptoms usually last 2 or 3 weeks, though occasionally for as long as 2 months. Most people make a full recovery, though a small number may develop complications. Once you have had hepatitis A you will be immune for life.

Eat and drink as well as you are able, but avoid alcohol. You will probably need more rest than normal.

You will be visited by an officer from Environmental Health who will try to find out where the infection may have come from. They will also ask for details about other people in your household so that they can be offered

treatment to prevent them from becoming ill.

A person with hepatitis A is infectious from about 2 weeks before they have symptoms until 1 week afterwards. They should remain off nursery/school/work for 7 days after the start of jaundice.

If someone in your household has hepatitis A:

- The infected person should not prepare food.
- Soiled bedding and clothes should be washed on the hot cycle of your washing machine.
- Clean surfaces (toilet seats, flush handles, door handles and taps) at least daily with bleach diluted as per manufacturer's instructions.
- If cleaning up diarrhoea or vomit, wear rubber gloves; wash the surface with hot soapy water, rinse, and allow to dry. Use paper towels or disposable cloths. Dispose of used cloths immediately (e.g. in a carrier bag).
- The infected person should not share towels/flannels with anyone.

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