
What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. It is often caused by an infection with the Hepatitis A virus.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

This virus is found in bowel motions (stools) of infected people and foods spoilt by sewerage.

It is spread by hand to mouth contact. This happens when a person with contaminated hands spreads the virus onto things that someone else may put in their mouth. Food is the commonest example, but eating utensils can also carry it. Hand contamination occurs by not thoroughly washing hands after visiting the toilet?

What are the symptoms?

Viral hepatitis has a long incubation time - 15 to 45 days (usually one month). This is between being in contact with the infection and developing the first symptoms.

The first signs are similar to flu ie fever and headache.

- ❖ The first symptoms are followed by:
- ❖ Sickness and discomfort under the right-hand side of the ribs
- ❖ Appetite becomes poor, especially for fatty foods
- ❖ Smokers may find that cigarettes lose their taste
- ❖ Jaundice - A yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes may appear in 3 - 4 days together with dark urine and pale bowel movement

Recovery usually follows in the next day or two.

How is it prevented?

You can protect yourself by:

- ❖ being extremely careful to always wash your hands after each visit to the toilet, and before eating
- ❖ being vaccinated against Hepatitis A before visiting all countries where sanitation is poor, particularly Southern and Eastern Europe, Africa, Middle and Far East
- ❖ being vaccinated if you work in a high risk occupation, such as sewage treatment
- ❖ avoiding inadequately cooked shellfish, raw salads, fruit, tap water, ice cubes & unpasteurised milk in high risk countries
- ❖ vaccination if your sexual or drug-taking practices might put you at risk

What if I get it?

Contact your GP. You may be asked to provide a stool sample as soon as possible.

Generally there is no specific medication that can be given.

- ❖ Rest is advisable during the early symptoms
- ❖ Eat foods that you can tolerate - special diets are unnecessary

- ❖ It is good advice to avoid alcohol for three months after recovery

In some cases an Environmental Health Officer may contact you. They will try to find out what led to your illness and offer advice about how to avoid infection in the future.

What about people I mix with?

If you remain well then there is no need to worry about others. People who get hepatitis A may have to wait quite a long time before know if close contacts have also been infected.

Cases are most infectious from 2 weeks before becoming unwell up until about a week after the start of the illness. The virus is present in huge numbers in the stools of cases so it is of vital importance to be extremely careful about hand washing after using the toilet or changing a soiled nappy.

What about work?

Your doctor will advise those with hepatitis A about when it is OK to return to work. This is usually once the jaundice settles. Food handlers and people working with children should contact the Public Health Department or Environmental Health Department at Scottish Borders Council for specific advice.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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