

Information about

Hepatitis A

A vaccine preventable disease



What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a virus that infects the liver. People who are infected with Hepatitis A vary in how sick they feel. The younger you are when you become infected, the less likely you are to feel sick. However, the majority of adults will feel unwell, lose their appetite, develop nausea and fatigue, and may feel like they have the flu. Some people also go off coffee and cigarettes. Many people develop jaundice – a yellow tinge to the skin and in the whites of the eyes; urine may become very dark; and, rarely, people may develop an intense itch.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A is spread from person to person, or through food or water that is contaminated with faeces that contains the Hepatitis A virus. There are other hepatitis viruses such as Hepatitis B and C, which are spread through sexual activity or through blood contact such as sharing needles or at birth, but this is hardly ever the case with Hepatitis A. The greatest risk is through exposure to contaminated water or food while travelling in countries with a high rate of Hepatitis A. Hepatitis A vaccination is completely effective in protecting against infection.



An information leaflet for patients and interested members of the general public prepared by the Digestive Health Foundation

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How do I know if I have Hepatitis A?

If your doctor suspects you have Hepatitis A, a blood test will be arranged to check your liver function and to see if you have antibodies to the Hepatitis A virus in your blood. There are two sorts of antibody: the IgM, which shows that you have the infection now or had it recently, and the IgG, which shows if you have had the infection in the past. Many adults have IgG antibodies without any memory of having hepatitis, which may be because they had hepatitis when they were very young and didn't experience any symptoms or sickness. If you have had vaccination against Hepatitis A you will also have IgG antibodies detected in your blood test.

Can I be infected with the Hepatitis A virus again?

No. Once you have had Hepatitis A you become immune to further infection from this specific virus.

Who is infectious?

People are most infectious before they become sick, when they don't know anything is wrong. By the time you know you have Hepatitis A you aren't very infectious. Young children may be infectious but show no obvious signs of infection. You may want to ask your doctor if family members should be vaccinated to reduce their chance of becoming infected.

How is Hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A. Most people feel unwell for a week or two and then gradually get better and make a complete recovery. However, it's best to avoid alcohol and, if possible, medication, while the liver is inflamed from the virus. People with Hepatitis A are sometimes sick enough to go to hospital, but this is very rare.

Can I get chronic liver damage from Hepatitis A?

No. Unlike Hepatitis B and C, Hepatitis A does not cause chronic liver damage or cirrhosis of the liver. Rarely, some people with Hepatitis A seem to have relapses for a few months, but after six months they should be completely back to normal.

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

- People who travel to Third World and Developing countries
- Childcare workers
- Men who have sex with men
- People who live in institutions
- Sewerage workers
- Healthcare workers
- Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

How can I protect myself from Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A infection is completely preventable. There is a safe and effective vaccine for Hepatitis A available through your doctor. There is also a vaccine that protects against both Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B. Some people may be advised to have this vaccine - if you are travelling to Asia or another part of the world where there is a high level of Hepatitis A, or if you are at risk because of your profession, you should discuss vaccination with your doctor.

Digestive Health Foundation

This information leaflet has been designed by the Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) as an aid to people who have been exposed to, or diagnosed with, Hepatitis A, or for those who wish to know more about this topic. This is not meant to replace personal advice from your medical practitioner.

The DHF is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.

The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA), the professional body representing the specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in gastrointestinal (GI) disorders. GI disorders are the most common health-related problems affecting the community.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website - www.gesa.org.au

dhf

Digestive Health Foundation

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