

February 2012

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus. Most people who are infected recover completely. Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A does not develop into chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and death from hepatitis A infection is rare.

How do you get hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is found in the stool (bowel movements) of persons infected with the virus. It is not spread by coughing or sneezing.

Hepatitis A is spread from person to person by putting anything in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A (also known as the “fecal-oral” route). This means that if someone with hepatitis A infection handles food without properly washing their hands after using the toilet and you eat that food contaminated with the virus, you could get Hepatitis A.

You can also get hepatitis A by:

- Drinking water contaminated with human sewage (Canadian tap water is safe).
- Eating raw shellfish from water polluted with human sewage.
- Sharing needles and other drug items used for injection and non-injection drugs.
- Having sex with an infected partner, even if that person has no signs or symptoms. This is because hepatitis A is most contagious before signs and symptoms ever appear.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis A?

Some people are at higher risk of hepatitis A infection:

- People who share a household with someone infected with hepatitis A.
- Sexual contacts of someone who is infected with hepatitis A.
- Travellers to countries where hepatitis A is common because clean water or food is not available.
- Children and staff of day nurseries, where someone is infected with Hepatitis A, especially centres where children are in diapers.
- Men who have sex with men.
- People who share contaminated injection drug equipment.

People with liver disease are not at higher risk of infection, but if they become infected with hepatitis A they are at higher risk of more serious complications.

What are the symptoms?

Some people may have no symptoms at all, while others may have:

- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Dark urine
- Stomach pains
- Tiredness
- Nausea/vomiting
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin)

Infants and young children often do not show any symptoms, however, they are still able to spread the virus to others.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within 30 days after contact with hepatitis A, but the range can be from 15 to 50 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread hepatitis A?

A person with hepatitis A can pass the virus to others for 1 to 2 weeks before they start to show symptoms. People can remain infectious for up to 1 week after they get sick.

How can the spread of hepatitis A be prevented?

- **Get the hepatitis A vaccine.**
 - One needle or shot of the vaccine is required for people who have been exposed to a known case, or to prevent community outbreaks. The cost of this one shot is covered by the province of Ontario if it is recommended for you by Toronto Public Health.
 - Two shots are needed for long-term protection. The cost of the second shot is not covered by the province. However, the cost may be covered by private health insurances.
- **Keep your hands clean.**
 - Wash your hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet, changing a diaper, helping someone who has diarrhea, helping children use the toilet, and before eating or preparing food.
 - Use an alcohol-based hand rub if soap and water are not available and hands are not visibly soiled.
- **Wash and cook all foods thoroughly**
 - Heating food to 185 degrees Fahrenheit or 85 degrees Celsius for 1 minute will kill the hepatitis A virus.
 - Do not eat raw seafood and vegetables washed in untreated water.
- **Other precautions:**
 - If you are traveling, especially outside of North America, be sure the water supply is safe before drinking it and use caution when consuming ice.
 - Do not swim in water that may be contaminated with human sewage.
 - Use condoms and avoid sexual practices that may permit fecal-oral transmission.

Can hepatitis A be treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. However, supportive care such as adequate nutrition and avoiding drinking alcohol during the acute phase of illness may reduce complications. Most people recover after 4 to 6 weeks of bed rest at home.

Can you get hepatitis A more than once?

No. Once you have had hepatitis A you cannot get it again.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact Toronto Health Connection: 416-338-7600, TTY: 416-392-0658, or speak with your doctor for more information about the hepatitis A vaccine.