

Hepatitis A Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by a virus, which leads to inflammation of the liver. It is sometimes known as infectious hepatitis or infective jaundice.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis A?

A few people, mainly children, may acquire the infection but not show any symptoms at all. However, the majority of people will have any, or all, of the following symptoms:

- feeling generally unwell and miserable
- tiredness
- nausea
- stomach pains
- fever
- jaundice (skin turns yellow)
- urine becomes dark
- stools become pale

Once a person has been exposed to Hepatitis A virus it can take 15 to 50 days for symptoms to start. The infection is usually mild and most people recover in a few weeks. However, some people experience tiredness for several months. Occasionally a person with severe illness may need to be admitted to hospital. Once a person has recovered from Hepatitis A infection they cannot catch it again.

Where does Hepatitis A come from?

Hepatitis A virus is found in the stools of an infected person, even those with no symptoms. The virus is usually present for about two weeks before symptoms and for about one week after symptoms appear. It is during this time that an infected person is most likely to pass on the virus.

How is Hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A infection is usually caught by swallowing the virus. This could happen in any of the following ways:

- From person to person: If an infected person does not wash their hands properly after going to the toilet, Hepatitis A virus will remain on their hands and can then be passed on directly to other people or by touching household items such as taps and toilet handles. Some sexual activities can also spread the virus between partners.
- From food or water contaminated with Hepatitis A virus: This is more likely to occur in countries where Hepatitis A infection is very common. The food and drinks most likely to be contaminated are fruits, salads, shellfish, ice and water.

How will I know I have Hepatitis A?

If you are ill with some of these symptoms and you think that you might have Hepatitis A you should arrange to see your family doctor (GP). The doctor may order a blood test, which can confirm the diagnosis of hepatitis A.

How can I avoid getting hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A infection can be prevented by:

- Good personal hygiene. Hands should be thoroughly washed and dried after going to the toilet, changing nappies, and before preparing food.

- Ensure that items such as toilet handles, which are likely to be touched by contaminated hands, are regularly cleaned.
- Avoid raw (or inadequately cooked) shellfish, raw vegetables, salads, unpeeled fruit, untreated drinking water, ice cubes and untreated milk in countries where Hepatitis A is common.*
- Avoid close contact (including sexual activity) with someone who is jaundiced or has Hepatitis A.
- Seek medical advice if you have close contact with someone who is jaundiced or has Hepatitis A. The doctor may be able to offer you a vaccination (injection) that will help prevent the infection.
- Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A if before visiting countries where Hepatitis A is common.*
- Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A if sexual activities are likely to put you at risk of catching the infection.

What special care should I take if I have hepatitis A?

Good personal hygiene is important. Washing and drying your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet and before preparing food will reduce the risk of passing the illness to other people.

How long should someone with hepatitis A stay away from work, school or nursery?

It is important that anyone with Hepatitis A rests and takes time off school/ work/ nursery whilst they are unwell. If you work with food you must tell your employer about your illness.

- All individuals with Hepatitis A infection should stay away from work/ school/ nursery for seven days after the start of jaundice or other symptoms.

Who cares if I have hepatitis A?

Your doctor and your local Environmental Health Officer (EHO) care.

Your doctor will give you advice about the medical aspects of Hepatitis A and will ask about close contacts. Your close contacts may require vaccination to help reduce their risk of getting hepatitis A and your Doctor or local Health Protection Unit may arrange this if necessary. You may also be contacted by someone from your local Environmental Health Department. The Environmental Health Officer (EHO) or doctor will advise you about personal hygiene and the need to stay off work etc.

For further information and advice, please contact:

Department: Environmental Health Department

Phone: 020 8547 5002

e-mail: environmental.health@rbk.kingston.gov.uk

Address: Guildhall, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, KT1 1EU

Website: www.kingston.gov.uk

*Information about the countries where Hepatitis A is common should be available from your GP or can be found in the Department of Health leaflet: "Health Advice for Travellers" which is available from Post Offices or via the free phone line: 0800 555 777