

Hepatitis A

Information Sheet

What is it?

Hepatitis A is an illness caused by a virus that is only found in humans. This is an uncommon infection in New Zealand. The virus causes infection of the liver. Unlike Hepatitis B and C, Hepatitis A infection does not become long-term or chronic.

Hepatitis A is a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956. People suffering from the illness will be contacted by their local Communicable Disease Nurse or Health Protection Officer to try and establish the source of their illness.

How does a person become infected?

Hepatitis A can affect anyone. The virus is passed out in the poo of infected people and in contaminated water and food.

It can be passed on through:

- Close personal contact – including sexual
- Poor personal hygiene
- Sharing personal things with an infected person, e.g. toothbrushes, facecloths, towels, etc.
- Contaminated food e.g. shellfish from infected sewage or water

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Symptoms usually begin 2 to 6 weeks after infection. In adults, early symptoms include nausea (upset stomach), loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of energy, fever, and stomach or side pain. A few days later, some people may notice that their urine has turned a dark colour and the whites of their eyes and their skin appears yellow (jaundice).

Some people with Hepatitis A, especially young children, may have no symptoms at all or have a mild flu-like illness (with no jaundice). These people are still infectious and can pass the illness onto others.

A person is most infectious during the 2 weeks before the symptoms begin to one week after they become yellow with jaundice.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by blood tests and Faecal (stool, poi, tutae) sample arranged by a doctor.

How bad is it?

The duration and severity of the illness varies. Hepatitis A infection is more severe with age, and in rare circumstances, can cause severe complications and liver failure.

Most people recover within 3 weeks. There is no treatment for Hepatitis A. Generally rest and plenty of fluids are recommended. Avoid alcohol and high-fat foods.

People who have come into close contact with Hepatitis A cases during their infectious period and are at risk of infection may be offered Hepatitis A vaccination or Immunoglobulin (IG). IG will provide short-term protection against Hepatitis A and vaccination provides longer term immunity.

Once you have had Hepatitis A, you cannot get it again.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your local Communicable Disease Nurse or Health Protection Officer can give you advice on this. People should not attend work, school or preschool while symptomatic.

- People who work in the food industry, early childhood centre workers and some healthcare workers **must not** return to work until well and at least seven days after the onset of jaundice.
- Children **must not** attend childcare (kindergartens, childcare centres, playcentres, kohanga reo) or school until well and at least seven days after the onset of jaundice.

How do I avoid the illness?

The key preventative measures are:

- Always wash and dry hands thoroughly:
 - after going to the toilet
 - after changing nappies
 - before eating or preparing food
 - after caring for someone with Hepatitis A
- If you are travelling overseas, especially to developing countries, be careful about the food you eat and the water you drink. The general rule is *boil it, cook it, peel it or leave it*. Make sure your food has been thoroughly and freshly cooked and is served piping hot. Avoid uncooked food apart from nuts, vegetables or fruit that can be shelled or peeled by you. Bottled water is the safest but make sure that the seals are intact when the bottle is purchased. If bottled water is not available, then treat the water by boiling it for at least 1 minute or using chlorine/iodine tablets. Safe water must be used for brushing teeth and food preparation. Check with your doctor about whether immunisation against Hepatitis A is appropriate.

For further information please contact:



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