

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is most common in countries where food and water may get contaminated due to poor hygiene practices. However, occasional outbreaks of hepatitis A do occur in Canada. Hepatitis A does not lead to a chronic illness, but is a potentially serious infection in the elderly and in persons who have chronic liver disease. If you were born in a country where hepatitis A is common, you have likely already been infected with HAV. The good news is once you have been exposed to HAV and have recovered, you will develop lifelong protection against it which means you will never get hepatitis A again.

I have hepatitis A. What can I expect?

Not all people infected with HAV will have symptoms. Pre-school children often have no symptoms, and, in general, children will have milder symptoms than adults. Symptoms may occur 15 to 50 days from the time you first come in contact with HAV.

Typical symptoms of an acute HAV infection include: fatigue, nausea and vomiting, abdominal discomfort, jaundice (yellowing of the whites of the eyes and skin), dark urine, low grade fever and loss of appetite.

The older you are when you get HAV, the more likely that you will experience more severe symptoms. Some people feel sick for one to two weeks, while in others the symptoms may last several months. Hepatitis A rarely causes death. However, persons with pre-existing chronic liver disease, including chronic hepatitis B and C, are at increased risk of serious complications from this infection.

Coping with hepatitis A symptoms

- You will feel tired and may have very little energy. You may need to take time off from daily activities, work or school to recover.
- Nausea and vomiting may cause you to lose your appetite. Try to eat small snacks and soft foods such as soup or toast.
- You may look “yellow”. Once you become yellow, you are no longer infectious. There is no need to isolate yourself. Let people around you know it is OK to be near you.
- Try not drink alcohol. Your liver may not be able to process alcohol and alcohol may make your symptoms worse.
- Talk to your doctor before taking over-the-counter medications or complementary medicine. None of the alternative therapies have proved helpful in treating hepatitis A.

How did I get hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is spread through close contact with an infected person, or by eating HAV contaminated food or drinking water. Because the virus is found in the stool of infected people, eating food prepared by an infected person, who does not wash his/her hands properly after using the washroom, is one way of getting the virus.

Eating raw or undercooked seafood and shellfish from water polluted with sewage, or eating salad greens that are rinsed in contaminated water are other ways of becoming infected. Sharing drug-use equipment, or having sexual contact with an infected person can also give you hepatitis A.

You have an increased risk of hepatitis A if you:

- travel to regions where hepatitis A is common,
- live with someone who is newly infected with HAV,
- use injection drugs and share contaminated drug preparation/injection materials,
- are an inmate in jail, or
- have sex involving oral/anal contact.

Can I protect myself from getting hepatitis A?

There is a safe and effective vaccine that can protect you from getting hepatitis A. The vaccine is usually given in two doses six months apart. The vaccine will give you protection for up to 20 years. A combined vaccine for hepatitis A and hepatitis B is also available. Since up to 40% of the reported cases of hepatitis A occur in travellers, it is advisable to protect yourself with HAV vaccination six weeks before you leave.

Consider these additional safety precautions:

- Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly especially after using the washroom, before preparing food and before eating.
- Avoid raw or undercooked food.
- If you are travelling to countries with high rates of hepatitis A:
 - drink bottled or boiled water and use it for brushing your teeth
 - drink bottled beverages without ice
 - avoid uncooked food including salads
 - avoid food from street vendors
 - peel and wash fresh fruits and vegetables yourself

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no drug treatment for hepatitis A. The disease will eventually run its course and an infected person will recover completely although recovery time varies for each person. Recovery from this virus infection means that you are protected for life from getting it again.

This information is current for March 2020.