

Hepatitis A

Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis refers to injury and inflammation of the liver and can be caused by viruses and other microorganisms, drugs, and some medical disorders. Hepatitis A infection is caused by a virus known as the Hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A affects the liver and causes symptoms such as generally feeling unwell, aches and pains, fever, nausea and lack of appetite, abdominal pain, dark coloured urine and the skin and eyeballs develop a yellowish colour called jaundice. The severity of these symptoms varies depending on the age of the person and it is possible for small children to have Hepatitis A and not have any symptoms at all. Illness usually lasts from 1 to 3 weeks although some people display symptoms for several months.

In Australia, Hepatitis A is a notifiable disease. This means that when a diagnosis of Hepatitis A is made the Public Health Unit is contacted to trace family members, friends and any other people who may have been exposed to the infectious person. If contact with the infectious person has been within 14 days, then an injection of immunoglobulin may be offered to try to prevent the person developing the illness.

There is no specific treatment for people infected with Hepatitis A. However, it is preventable via vaccination. After contracting acute Hepatitis, A, immunity is developed; this means it is unlikely you will contract Hepatitis A again.

How did I acquire Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A virus is shed from the infected person via their faeces and easily contaminates the hands during regular toileting practices. Hepatitis A is usually passed on when the virus particles from an infected person are swallowed by another person. This can occur through eating food that has been prepared by a person with Hepatitis A, poor hand washing after contact with nappies, linen or any item soiled with infected faeces and via direct contact with an infectious person

(including sexual contact). The Hepatitis A virus also lives for several days in the environment and objects such as door handles, lift buttons, and chairs, these can easily become contaminated from unwashed hands. Infection with Hepatitis A has also been linked to eating raw shellfish or drinking water contaminated with sewage as well as poor hand hygiene and poor sanitation practices. Hepatitis A is common in many developing countries and vaccination against Hepatitis A is often recommended before travel to these places.

Who is at risk from Hepatitis A infections?

Any non-vaccinated or non-immune person who comes into contact with the Hepatitis A virus is at risk of developing Hepatitis A infection. The high-risk groups for contact with the Hepatitis A virus include:

- Plumbers and sewerage workers.
- People travelling overseas in developing countries where Hepatitis A is known to be endemic.
- People who live and work in rural and remote indigenous communities with high levels of Hepatitis A infection.
- People who work in childcare centres.
- Regular contacts of intellectually disabled people e.g., carers, teachers.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Injecting drug users.

How can Hepatitis A be spread?

People with Hepatitis A are infectious from 1 to 2 weeks before symptoms appear until about a week after they develop jaundice. Infants and children sometimes shed the virus in their faeces for up to six months after their illness. After contact with the Hepatitis A virus, it takes between 2 to 6 weeks to develop the illness (incubation period) although the average period is 25 days.

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How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of **ALL** infections.
- A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves and an apron or gown when they enter your room and will provide advice to your visitors about wearing these items also.
- You will be allocated a private room with your own en-suite facilities. We ask that your movement throughout the ward is limited to essential movement only, such as physiotherapy. If you are unsure about when you can leave your room, please speak to the nursing staff.

Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day.

Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection prevention and control team.

Alternative - Alcohol based hand rub / gel

During your stay in hospital you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled / dirty. There are a variety of brands on the market and are available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

Can I still have visitors?

During your infectious period (up to 1 week after developing jaundice) we recommend that you restrict the number of visitors you have to as few as possible. You may remain in contact with your relatives by the telephone in your room.

To prevent the spread of Hepatitis A, the nursing staff will provide education to your visitors about the need to wear protective equipment such as gloves and an apron or gown as well as instruct your visitors on the importance of strict hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to do this. They can use either; soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol hand rub provided outside your room.

What happens when I get home?

- If you are still in your infectious period then it is important that any family member or close contact wear gloves for the washing of clothes, linen, crockery, and cutlery or for the cleaning of the bath, toilet and shower.
- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine, or faeces. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.
- Children with Hepatitis A should be kept home and excluded from school and childcare centres until they are no longer infectious. Adults should stay home from work.
- Sexually active persons should abstain from sexual contact until they are no longer infectious (condoms will not prevent Hepatitis A transmission).

Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department, ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday.

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Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively contact the Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055.

References

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheets – Hepatitis A (29 May 2019)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); General Factsheet – Hepatitis A (July 2020)

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017_013

Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). Australian Immunisation Handbook, Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra, 2018, www.immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au