

HEPATITIS A

WHAT IS HEPATITIS A?

The hepatitis A is a viral infection which causes inflammation of the liver and interferes with normal liver functions. Hepatitis A infection can be sexually transmitted and symptoms may take several weeks to appear; the average is 28 days.

Hepatitis A does not cause chronic liver disease.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms include fever, loss of appetite, nausea, fatigue, stomach pain and yellowing of skin and eyes (jaundice).

Symptoms are usually mild, and the illness usually lasts one to two weeks. Although severe cases can last several months. The severity of the illness increases with age; it also increases in persons with pre-existing chronic liver disease. Once you have had hepatitis A infection you cannot get it again.

DIAGNOSIS

The only way to know if you have hepatitis A is to get tested. A blood test identifies if you currently have hepatitis A, if you have had hepatitis A in the past, or if you have already received the vaccine.

HOW IT SPREADS

Hepatitis A is found in the feces of an infected person. The virus is spread when the fecal matter of an infected person makes its way into the mouth of another person (fecal-oral contact).

Those at risk of infection are those who have not been previously exposed to hepatitis A or those who have not been vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A can be spread by sexual activities involving fecal-oral contact (such as rimming).

The virus can also be transmitted by fingers (anal-finger contact), a penis if having anal intercourse, and sex toys if they have come into direct contact with infected feces during sex and then enter another person's mouth.

Handling a used condom after anal sex and then putting fingers in the mouth can also transmit hepatitis A.

HOW LONG ARE PEOPLE CONTAGIOUS?

People with hepatitis A virus can pass the infection to others from approximately 2 weeks before the onset of their symptoms, until a few days after the jaundice appears. Most cases are probably not infectious after the first week of jaundice.

TREATMENT

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Recovery from symptoms following infection may be slow and can take several weeks or months.

Hospitalization is unnecessary unless you have acute liver failure. Treatment is focused on maintaining comfort, adequate nutrition, including replacing fluids that lost through vomiting and diarrhea.

You will likely become immune to (protected from) hepatitis A for life after you recover. In this case you do not require vaccination.

PREVENTION

- If you have not had acute hepatitis A, get vaccinated; the hepatitis A vaccine is 90 per cent to 97 per cent effective in preventing infection after completing the two-dose series this is the most effective way to protect oneself from the virus
- The vaccine is recommended to individuals who are HIV positive, men who have same sex partners, people who use drugs, or being a sexual partner of someone with acute hepatitis A infection
- Barrier methods (such as gloves, oral dams, and condoms) can reduce potential contact with the virus during oral-anal and finger-anal sexual contact and with sex-toy use involving the anus
- Washing hands after handling a barrier or sex toy can also help reduce the risk of transmission

The vaccine is not publicly funded but may be free for people at greater risk of infection. Speak with a Public Health nurse or your healthcare provider.

COMPLICATIONS

- Hepatitis A does not cause long-term liver damage
- If you already have liver disease, you're at greater risk for severe complications
- Individuals with clotting factor disorders such as hemophilia are also at increased risk for complications if they have previous liver damage
- Death from hepatitis A is rare

Hepatitis A is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate follow-up can be done.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**
- [The Canadian Immunization Guide](#)
- catie.ca/hepatitis