

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. Hepatitis A is different from Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C which you may also have heard of.

What are the symptoms?

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

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

The infection is usually mild and most people recover in a few weeks. However, the tiredness can last for several months in some people. 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.

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). If appropriate, the doctor will take a small amount of blood which will be sent to the laboratory for testing.

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 a person becomes ill and for about one week after symptoms start. It is only for this time that a person can 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. The virus can then be passed on from these contaminated hands to other people directly or via household items such as taps and toilet handles which have been touched. Certain 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.

What is the incubation period?

Once a person has swallowed the Hepatitis A virus it will take at least 15 and up to 50 days for any symptoms to start.

How is Hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A. Anyone with the infection should ensure that they have plenty of rest and follow any specific advice given by their doctor.

How is Hepatitis A prevented?

Hepatitis A infection can be prevented by:

- good personal hygiene. Hands should be washed properly after going to the toilet, changing nappies, and before preparing food.
- ensuring that items such as toilet handles, which are likely to be touched by contaminated hands, are regularly cleaned.
- avoiding 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*.
- avoiding close contact (including sexual activity) with someone who is jaundiced or has Hepatitis A.
- seeking 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) which will help prevent the infection.
- being vaccinated against Hepatitis A if visiting countries where the infection is common*.
- being vaccinated against Hepatitis A if sexual activities are likely to put you at risk of catching the infection.

How long should I stay off school or work?

It is important that anyone with Hepatitis A rests and takes time off school/work/nursery whilst feeling unwell.

In addition it is essential that the following individuals with Hepatitis A infection stay away from work/school/nursery for seven days after the start of their symptoms:

- children under five years attending nurseries/playgroups etc.
- older children, or adults, with poor hygiene.
- food handlers.
- health care staff who have direct contact with patients.

Further information and advice can be obtained from:

London Borough of Merton Environmental Health Department on 020 8545 3024.

*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" available from Post Offices or via the freephone line: 0800 555 777