



## London Health Protection Team Factsheet: Hepatitis A

### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a disease caused by the hepatitis A virus which affects the liver. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and viruses are a common cause.

### How is hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus is caught by eating or drinking food or water which is contaminated with the virus. The infection can also be spread by close contact with an infected person. The virus is spread by poor personal or public hygiene. It can be caught where standards of hygiene are low in this country and abroad.

### How do I know if I or someone else has it?

The illness usually begins with a sudden onset of fever (temperature), feeling unwell, loss of appetite, tiredness, nausea and stomach pain which may be followed within a few days by jaundice - a yellow discolouration of the whites of the eyes and often the skin. Severity of symptoms increases with age. Young children may have mild infections without jaundice or other symptoms and many may have no symptoms at all.

### Is hepatitis A infectious?

Yes, the infection is most commonly spread from person to person by infected faeces (stools) and poor hygiene. Transmission within households is very common. The faeces from infected people are infectious for two weeks before the person becomes ill and for about a week after the jaundice appears. Children without symptoms may be infectious for several weeks longer. People travelling abroad to countries where sanitation is poor are at risk of becoming infected. It is always advisable to seek travel health advice from your GP before undertaking any foreign travel. A vaccine against hepatitis A is available and can be obtained from a GP/travel health clinic before travelling to countries where hepatitis A is common.

### How do you get hepatitis A?

You can be infected with the hepatitis A virus by:

- Eating food prepared by someone with the infection who hasn't washed their hands properly or washed them in water contaminated with sewage
- Drinking contaminated water (including ice cubes)
- Eating raw or undercooked shellfish from contaminated water
- Close contact with someone who has hepatitis A
- Having sex with someone who has the infection (this is particularly a risk for men who have sex with men) or injecting drugs using contaminated equipment.

### How can the spread of hepatitis A infection be avoided?

Young children often have infection without having symptoms. The most important steps to prevent the spread of the infection are:

- Good hand washing; especially after using the toilet, after changing nappies, after helping a child with toileting and before eating and preparing food, is the most effective way to prevent hepatitis A spreading.
- Toilets (handles and seats) should be kept clean; this should include the use of normally available cleaning agents found in most supermarkets/shops.

#### **Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A infection?**

Hepatitis A can be prevented by vaccination. The hepatitis A vaccine is an inactivated vaccine (not a live virus) and cannot cause the illness it protects against. The vaccine is usually offered to household contacts of infected people to prevent transmission. The vaccine is very safe and effective but may not prevent infection in all cases but may lessen the symptoms of the disease. Side effects are usually mild and the commonest reactions are transient soreness at the injection site. The full immunisation schedule involves being given two doses of hepatitis A. The first dose of vaccine will give short term protection (lasting approximately 6 months). A second dose of hepatitis A vaccine given 6 to 12 months after the first dose provides long term protection (lasting at least 25 years). People should be vaccinated against hepatitis A before travelling to countries where hepatitis A is common. Seek advice from your GP or travel health clinic.

#### **Is there treatment for hepatitis A?**

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Symptoms, for the infection, are treated as they appear. Individuals may need to be hospitalised as a result of their illness. There is a small risk of death during the acute phase of infection particularly in those aged 60 and over. A person can return to their work/ school roughly seven days after the illness (jaundice) begins if they feel well enough.

Once a person has recovered from hepatitis A infection they will be immune (protected from reinfection) for life.

#### **What should I do if I think a member of my household has the illness?**

Seek advice from your GP.

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