

# HEPATITIS A

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. In Canada, hepatitis A is relatively uncommon, but cases still occur every year. Most infections in Ontario are linked to travel to countries where hepatitis A is more common, but outbreaks can also happen locally. Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it occurs most frequently in school age children and young adults. Other groups at increased risk of getting hepatitis A include staff and children of day care centres with diapered children, travellers to countries where the disease is widespread, people with chronic liver disease, injection drug users, and men who have sex with men.

Hepatitis A does not cause chronic infection, and most people recover fully and develop lifelong immunity. However, illness can be severe in older adults or those with existing liver problems. On rare occasions, hepatitis A can lead to acute liver failure, which can be fatal.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms usually appear two to six weeks after exposure, with an average of about four weeks. They can include:

- Fever and feeling unwell
- Loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain or discomfort
- Dark urine
- Jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes)

People are most contagious about two weeks before symptoms start and up to one week after jaundice appears. Some people may have no symptoms but can still spread the virus. Children under six years of age often have mild or no symptoms, while older children and adults are more likely to develop jaundice. Most people recover within a few weeks, but fatigue can last for months.

## How does hepatitis A spread?

The virus spreads when stool from an infected person contaminates food, water or surfaces. Common ways include:

- Eating food prepared by someone infected who didn't wash their hands
- Eating raw or undercooked shellfish from contaminated water
- Drinking contaminated water or ice (especially when travelling)

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- Changing diapers of an infected child without proper handwashing
- Close personal contact, including oral-anal sexual contact

## How can hepatitis A be prevented?

Hepatitis A is one of the most common vaccine-preventable illnesses in travellers. The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated in advance. Two doses given 6 months apart are 90-97% effective and provides protection for over 20 years in healthy individuals.

The hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for:

- Travelers to countries where Hepatitis A is common
- Children six months and older
- People with chronic liver disease or weakened immune systems
- Men who have sex with men
- People who use drugs

### Other prevention tips:

- Wash your hands well with soap and warm water before eating or preparing food, and after using the bathroom or changing diapers
- When traveling:
  - Drink bottled or boiled water
  - Avoid ice cubes in drinks
  - Avoid raw shellfish
  - Eat food that is cooked well and peel raw fruits and vegetables yourself
- Practice safer sex and never share needles or drug equipment

## How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific medication for treating hepatitis A. Most people recover fully without complications by resting, drinking fluids and avoiding alcohol and drugs that affect the liver.

## What if I have been in close contact with someone who has hepatitis A?

Household members, daycare contacts or others who have had close contact with someone who has hepatitis A or ate food they prepared should:

- Confirm their immune status for hepatitis A
- Contact their doctor or local public health unit immediately
- Get a dose of hepatitis A vaccine within 14 days of exposure to prevent illness, if eligible
  - In some cases, immune globulin (Ig) may be recommended instead for infants under six months of age, immunocompromised people and certain household contacts