

Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (Hep A) is an infectious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. Approximately 1000 – 3000 cases of Hepatitis A are reported each year in Canada.

Symptoms & Duration

Symptoms are usually abrupt and include fever, malaise, abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, tiredness, nausea, and vomiting followed by dark urine and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). Symptoms of infection become more severe as people become older. Young children may not show any signs of infection other than feeling “unwell”. Symptoms usually last less than two months but may persist for as long as six months.

Incubation Period

Symptoms usually occur within 28 – 30 days after the virus enters the body, but they can begin any time between 15 – 50 days.

Recovery, Long Term Effects & Immunity

Most people recover completely and acquire life long immunity. About 15% of people infected with Hep A may experience relapsing symptoms over a six to nine month period. Death from Hep A infection is rare.

How is the Hepatitis A Virus Spread?

The Hep A virus is spread from person to person by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with Hep A. Once infected, a person can pass the virus to others for two weeks or more before they even know they are sick. They remain infectious for up to one week after they get sick, especially when they have jaundice. Hep A outbreaks have also been linked to eating shellfish or any food that has come into contact with water contaminated with sewage. Hep A can also be spread through anal-oral sexual contact with a person who has Hep A. If you have had close contact with a person with Hep A, a vaccine is available that can help prevent you from getting sick if it is given within 14 days of your contact with the ill person.

How do you Prevent Hepatitis A Virus Infection?

- **Thorough hand washing is the best prevention.** Wash hands after using the toilet, changing diapers and before handling or eating food.
- Do not eat raw shellfish and avoid eating raw fish.
- If traveling outside Canada, be sure the water you drink is bottled or properly treated. Remember that ice cubes could be contaminated.
- Avoid sex that involves anal-oral contact.
- Consider the Hep A immunization if your personal and or professional life puts you at risk for Hep A. The Hep A vaccine consists of one dose with a booster, 6 – 12 months after the first dose. Protection is expected to last 10 years after the second dose.
- If traveling to an area where Hep A is common, immunization is strongly recommended.