

# Hepatitis A

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. This can be caused by alcohol and some drugs, but usually it is the result of a viral infection. There are many types of virus which can cause hepatitis. Each of these viruses acts differently.

The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is a common infection in many parts of the world. It is possible to become infected through eating or drinking contaminated food or water.

The virus is found in faeces. It can be passed on if even a tiny amount of faeces from a person with hepatitis A comes into contact with another person's mouth.

This means the virus can also be passed on sexually through practices such as rimming. Personal hygiene, with careful hand washing, can minimise the risk of the virus being passed on.

## Signs and symptoms

People may have no symptoms at all, but they can still pass on the virus to others. Symptoms may include:

- a short, mild, flu-like illness
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- jaundice (yellow skin and whites of eyes, darker yellow urine and pale faeces)
- itchy skin.

Some people may need to be admitted to hospital.

## Where to go for help

- A hospital Accident and Emergency department.

- Your own GP.
- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic.

You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the 'special' or GUM clinic. Or check our Lovelife web site ([www.lovelife.uk.com](http://www.lovelife.uk.com)) for a directory of GUM clinics in the UK.

You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any NHS clinic anywhere in the country – you don't have to go to a local one – and you don't have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics may not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)

## The tests for hepatitis A

Your GP or doctor at an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic can diagnose hepatitis A by carrying out blood tests. You will be asked questions to try to discover the source of the infection.

What does a **positive test** result mean?

It could show:

**Past infection.** This means that you have been in contact with the hepatitis A virus and your body has cleared it. You now have a natural protection against future

# Hepatitis A

infection with the hepatitis A virus.

**Current infection.** By the time most people have developed symptoms of hepatitis A they will be less infectious to others, but in the weeks before this there will have been a risk of passing on the infection.

Your doctor will ask you questions to find out if others have been at risk of hepatitis A. Those who have been in contact with the virus and have become infected may be given an injection to reduce the severity of the symptoms.

Most of the symptoms of hepatitis A settle after a few weeks, although some people can feel tired for a number of months after infection.

There is little likelihood of chronic liver damage and no chronic carrier state (where a person remains chronically infected).

What does a **negative test** result mean?

This result means that you have never been in contact with hepatitis A and have no natural protection against it.

If you are thought to be at risk of hepatitis A infection, the doctor may advise you to be immunised.

## **Diagnosis and treatment**

Infection with hepatitis A is usually mild, but occasionally causes severe inflammation of the liver, requiring admission to hospital.

## **Immunisation**

For hepatitis A you are given a single injection in the arm which gives you protection for a year. A second booster injection at 6 to 12 months gives you protection for up to 10 years. Most hepatitis A immunisations are given to people who are travelling to parts of the world with a high incidence of hepatitis A.

These injections are available from your GP.

You can also get immunised to prevent hepatitis A developing, if you have recently come into contact with it.

Immunisation is also recommended for those whose sexual practices are likely to put them at risk.

## **Follow-up**

If you are infected with hepatitis A, you should limit the amount of alcohol you drink. The doctor may also offer you dietary advice.

Your doctor will advise you about any precautions necessary to ensure that you avoid infecting others with the virus.

## **Further information**

For further information, visit the British Liver Trust web site at [www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk), or write to British Liver Trust, Ransomes Europark, Ipswich, IP3 9QG. Information on hepatitis A is also available from NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.

# Hepatitis A

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis,

• testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

• Alternatively, free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).



**Health Promotion England**

40 Eastbourne Terrace, London W2 3QR

[www.hpe.org.uk](http://www.hpe.org.uk)

© Crown copyright 2000; 06/01 010