

Hepatitis A

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What is Hepatitis A?

'Hepatitis' means inflammation or swelling of the liver. It can be caused by chemicals or drugs, or by different kinds of viral infections. One common cause of infectious hepatitis is the hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver. Infection with one type of hepatitis virus does *NOT* give protection against infection with other hepatitis viruses.

What are the symptoms?

Hepatitis A is associated with the symptoms of feeling unwell, aches and pains, fever, nausea, lack of appetite, abdominal discomfort and darkening of the urine, which is followed within a few days by jaundice (yellowing of the eyeballs and skin). Illness usually lasts approximately one to three weeks (although some symptoms can last several months) and is almost always followed by complete recovery. Small children who become infected usually have no symptoms. Hepatitis A does *NOT* cause long-term liver disease and deaths caused by hepatitis A are rare. The period between contact with the virus to the development of symptoms is usually four weeks, but can range from two to seven weeks.

How does it affect human health?

Hepatitis A has been responsible for several Australian food-borne disease outbreaks.

Hepatitis A is commonly spread via food. As the primary source of the virus is humans, intimate contact of any kind with an infected person can also spread the virus.

While the virus cannot grow or multiply in food, it can survive in food after contact for several hours and on surfaces - such as preparation areas and utensils - for up to 30 days.

Food can be contaminated after contact with dirty water, or during preparation when infected food handlers carry and transmit the virus from unwashed hands.

Foods that have been associated with hepatitis A outbreaks are raw or improperly cooked shellfish and prawns, fruits and vegetables.

How is hepatitis A infection spread?

Infected people can pass on the virus to others from two weeks before the development of symptoms until one week after the appearance of jaundice (about three weeks in total). Very large amounts of the virus are found in faeces (stools) of an infectious person during the infectious period. The virus can survive in the environment for several weeks in the right conditions (for example, in sewage). Hepatitis A is usually transmitted when virus from an infected person is swallowed by another person through:

- eating food that has been handled by an infectious person;
- touching nappies, linen and towels soiled with the faeces of an infectious person;
- direct contact (including sexual) with an infectious person.

How can the organism be managed?

- Make sure food products are cooked to the required temperature. Cook all food thoroughly - cooking to 85°C eliminates the hepatitis A virus.
- Always wash your hands with soap and running water and dry with a one-use towel before preparing food.
- Separate raw and cooked food.
- Wash and dry your hands thoroughly after touching raw seafood.
- Thoroughly clean all utensils, equipment and surfaces after preparing raw food and before contact with other foods..
- Store raw seafood, meat and chicken at the bottom of the fridge so it can't drip onto other foods.
- A food business must ensure food handlers do not handle food if there is a possibility of contamination through food-borne illness.

What must I do if I work in the food industry and are infected with Hepatitis A?

People who are infected with hepatitis A must not work with food. For more information and or advice please contact your local NSW Health Public Health Unit (contact details at www.health.nsw.gov.au) so steps can be taken to control further spread of the disease.