



Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is one of five known viruses that cause inflammation of the liver (the others are B, C, D and E). Most people recover from the hepatitis A virus within six months without any serious health problems.

How Is Hepatitis A Transmitted?

Transmission is usually by drinking water or eating food that has been contaminated with faecal matter containing the virus. Unlike the hepatitis B and C viruses, the hepatitis A virus remains stable when liver cells secrete it into bile, which enters the digestive tract. Faecal matter from an infected person has a high concentration of the virus, whereas saliva and other bodily fluids have a low concentration. The virus can survive in this contaminated faecal matter on a person's hand, for example, or on a surface for three to four hours at normal room temperatures. Thus, an eating utensil contaminated with the virus could be a way to transmit the infection to a person. Contaminated shellfish is a frequent source of infection. Direct contact with an infected person is another confirmed transmission route, as is kissing on the mouth and anal sex. Contamination of needles used for intravenous administration of drugs is a suspected route of transmission. In over 40% of the reported cases it is not known how these people were infected.

Who Is At Risk For Hepatitis A?

The risk of being infected with the hepatitis A virus generally depends on the hygienic and sanitary conditions in an area. High-risk geographic areas are the Middle East, South America, Eastern Europe, Central America, Africa and South East Asia. Children at daycare centre spread the virus because of faecal-oral contamination through diaper changing. Outbreaks have been reported in the military and at institutions for the disabled. Those using injectable drugs with contaminated needles have also been infected with the virus. Known risk factors for Hepatitis A include: household or sexual contact, daycare attendance or employment and recent international travel. In about 42% of cases it is uncertain how the person became infected. Estimates are that a third of the Australian population has been infected.

What Are The Symptoms For Hepatitis A Infection?

As with the other hepatitis viruses a person infected with hepatitis A may not have any symptoms. Common symptoms resemble the flu. These include fatigue, nausea, vomiting, pain in the liver area, dark urine or light coloured stools and fever. Liver function tests are elevated, with many adults developing jaundice. Children under two rarely have symptoms. Most people recover within six months.

Can Hepatitis A Result In Serious Complications?

A very small percentage of people infected with hepatitis A risk serious complications. These include people with alcoholic hepatitis, chronic hepatitis with cirrhosis or the elderly over 60 years old. These patients may suffer liver failure after becoming infected with Hepatitis A. Patients with hepatitis A may show improvement in their symptoms and liver function tests only to suffer a relapse, usually after four weeks. A relapse can occur more than once and there is no way to predict who will suffer a recurrence of acute symptoms. In rare cases, jaundice lasts for two or more months. It is rare for pregnant women who are infected with hepatitis A to suffer serious complications to themselves or their newborn children.

How Is Hepatitis A Diagnosed?

Hepatitis A is diagnosed by a blood test that is positive for the antibody to the virus, which appears about four weeks after the infection. There are no false positives or negatives with this test. Liver function tests (serum alanine aminotransferase [ALT] and aspartate aminotransferase [AST]) are elevated above normal, often to very high levels. Symptoms will normally appear during the first four weeks of infection.

How Is Hepatitis A Treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Most patients are told to rest for one to four weeks after a diagnosis is made, to avoid intimate contact and to consume foods high in protein. People who have come into contact with the patient should be given temporary immunisation with immune serum globulin (ISE), within two weeks of exposure. The vaccine is effective in preventing infection in over 90% of people who were exposed and lasts 10 years.