

# Hepatitis A

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection that is caused by the hepatitis A virus. Typically, hepatitis A is found in countries where sanitation is poor and is spread through contaminated food and water. Sources of infection in Canada have been related to imported produce from these countries and returning ill travellers who spread the virus to others.

## How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A can be spread from one person to another person by the fecal-oral route. This means that feces (stool) from a person who is infected with hepatitis A must get into the mouth of another person for the infection to spread. This can happen many different ways, such as:

- Eating food handled by someone who is infected with the virus and who does not thoroughly wash his or her hands after using the toilet
- Drinking contaminated water
- Eating raw shellfish from water polluted with sewage
- Being in close contact with a person who is infected, even if that person has no signs or symptoms of the infection
- Having sex with someone who is infected

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms of hepatitis A appear from 15 to 50 days after coming in contact with the virus, but most often occur within 30 days. Symptoms may include fever, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, feeling generally unwell (malaise), yellow skin and eyes (jaundice), pale stools and dark urine.

Young children may not show any symptoms. The disease can be more severe in adults, especially those with other health conditions affecting their immune system, including liver disease. If you think you have symptoms of hepatitis A, it is important to see your health care provider and not attend work, school or child care while ill.

## What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There is no medication to treat hepatitis A. Most people are sick for about 1 to 2 weeks and then recover, while others may develop more serious illness. It is important to see your healthcare provider if you think you might be sick with hepatitis A. After recovering from the illness, a person is considered immune and protected against hepatitis A in the future.

## **Are there any restrictions or special considerations for people ill with hepatitis A?**

People who handle food during their work, provide health care services or work in a child care centre, and children who attend a child care centre, must stay home and away from work or the child care centre if they are sick with hepatitis A. Ottawa Public Health will advise people whose work involves preparing or handling food, health care or child care, and children who attend daycare, when they may return.

## **How can I protect myself against hepatitis A?**

There are many ways that you can protect yourself and others from a hepatitis A infection:

- Talk to your healthcare provider about the hepatitis A vaccine, especially before traveling to countries where hepatitis A is more common
- Avoid local water when travelling in countries where the water supply is uncertain; instead, use only sealed bottled water or treated (chemically disinfected or boiled) water for drinking, brushing teeth, preparing foods, making ice and cooking
- Do not eat raw foods washed in local water when travelling; eat only cooked food and fruit that can be peeled after it has been washed with water from a safe source
- Wash raw fruits and vegetables well with clean running water before eating; to prevent the fruit inside from becoming contaminated when cut or peeled, scrub rough fruit like melons and oranges with a brush first
- Do not eat raw seafood
- Always wash hands well with soap and water for at least 15 seconds before and after preparing food, before eating, after using the toilet, after changing diapers, after handling pets or their feces and anytime hands may be dirty
- Avoid contact with stool (feces) during sexual activity
- Do not prepare foods or drinks for others if you have diarrhea

## **What is Ottawa Public Health's role?**

Ottawa Public Health (OPH) must be notified by health care providers and laboratories when a person is infected with Hepatitis A. OPH conducts an investigation to potentially determine the cause or source of the infection, provide education to the infected person and their close contacts, and follows up with the infected person's health care provider, as needed.

When a person has been exposed to the hepatitis A virus, infection may be prevented by giving a dose of hepatitis A vaccine as soon as possible after the exposure has happened. Ottawa Public Health will determine if the vaccine is needed and provide the first dose at no cost. A second dose should be given 6 to 12 months later by a health care provider to ensure long-term protection against future exposures, such as travel to countries where hepatitis A is common. There may be a fee for the second dose.

For more information, call Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744, or visit [OttawaPublicHealth.ca](http://OttawaPublicHealth.ca)