

# HEPATITIS A – THE FACTS

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (hep A or HAV) is an acute infection that causes inflammation (swelling) of the liver. There are approximately 1.4 million cases of hepatitis A globally every year<sup>1</sup>. Hepatitis A is not very common in Australia.

## How do you get hepatitis A?

People can only get hepatitis A when faeces (poo) that is infected with hepatitis A comes in contact with their mouth.

The ways that it might happen include:

- eating food prepared by someone with hepatitis A who hasn't washed their hands.
- drinking water that might be contaminated by faeces or sewage.
- having anal-oral sex (licking someone's bottom who has hepatitis A).
- cleaning up nappies, towels and linen of a person that has hepatitis A and not washing your hands.

## Will hepatitis A make me sick?

The symptoms of hepatitis A will be different for children and adults. Babies and young children generally do not get sick. Generally, adults will be sick for about a month and have some of the following symptoms:

- fever
- weakness and fatigue
- loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting
- joint aches or pains (especially in liver)
- jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes)
- dark urine (wee) and light faeces.

## How will I know if I have hep A?

The only way to know for sure if you have hepatitis A is to have a blood test. People often don't go to

the doctor because they think that they just had a bad case of gastro.

The incubation period (time between being exposed and getting sick) is about 15 to 50 days. Hepatitis A will be excreted (in faeces) for 2 weeks before you get sick. So people are considered to be infectious for 1 week after the jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes) starts.

## Is there a vaccination?

Yes, there is a vaccination for hepatitis A. The standard vaccination for hepatitis A is two injections which should be given six months apart. However, if you forgot to get the second injection, it is never too late. Once you have the second vaccination you will get long-term immunity.

The other option is to have the Twinrix vaccination that will provide immunisation for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. This vaccination is three injections given over six months. It is likely that you will have to pay for either type of vaccination.

The following groups should consider getting vaccinated:

- travellers to developing countries
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- people working in Indigenous communities
- people working in child care centres
- people with disabilities and people working in disability services

## What is going to happen to me?

Most people will experience some sickness but usually will fully recover within eight weeks; often feeling better by the third week. There are rare cases where Hepatitis A can cause further health complications.

### Can hepatitis A be treated?

Most people won't need treatment (medication) for hepatitis A. Your immune system will activate and you will develop antibodies that fight off the virus, curing it from your body. These antibodies give you a lifelong immunity.

### What can I do to keep healthy?

There is no treatment for hepatitis A, but resting, drinking lots of fluids, and eating when you can will definitely help you feel better. Only take medications that are essential and do not drink any alcohol. You should also not drink alcohol while you are getting better.

### How can I prevent Hepatitis A?

To prevent getting hepatitis A, consider having the vaccination. Personal hygiene is the easiest way to prevent transmitting hepatitis A to others. So remember to wash your hands after going to the toilet or changing nappies and before preparing food for others.

### Can I work if I have hepatitis A?

Under the food safety standard food handlers must tell their supervisor if they have hepatitis A or if they may have contaminated food. While the symptoms are short term they can sometimes be quite severe. Most people will require sick leave. Employers need to minimise risks and hazards in the workplace as well as providing the employee with privacy and confidentiality.

If a person is working in an area where hepatitis A may cause a risk to others, (such as food handling) then employers need to review safety standards and minimise any potential risks. During the acute phase of hepatitis A, the

employee should not work in any area where there is a risk of transmission.

### When can I return to work after having hepatitis A?

According to Queensland Health "people with hepatitis A should not return to work, school or child care until they are no longer infectious which is at least seven days after the onset of jaundice."

### Interested in finding out more?

- Talk to your GP
- Visit the Queensland Health website
- Contact Hepatitis Queensland on our **Infoline 1800 437 222** or visit **[www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au)**