

Working with the people of Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waitemata

Frequently Asked Questions for Hepatitis A

What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an acute infectious disease affecting the liver.

Hepatitis A is caused by a virus, which is excreted in bowel motions. A person is infected by swallowing food or water that has been contaminated. The Hepatitis A virus can survive for a long time in the environment in damp moist conditions.

The most infectious time is before a person knows they are sick frequently by as much as 2 weeks before symptoms appear. The disease is more serious in adults and can last for several months. Fortunately recovery is complete without leaving permanent damage. An attack of Hepatitis A develops a lifetime immunity, which prevents it occurring again.

How do you catch Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is spread by:

- Food, water or milk being contaminated
- Close personal contact and poor personal hygiene
- Eating or drinking things handled by an infected person

Can Hepatitis A disease be prevented after contact with a sick person?

It is recommended customers (of a food establishment), family and close friends of a case have an injection of immunoglobulin, if it can be given in time to prevent the disease. This gives short-term protection and is effective for a period of 2-3 months. Immunoglobulin is an extract of antibodies taken from blood donations. It is most useful in preventing the disease among close contacts after they have been exposed to a case. For more permanent protection there are vaccines against Hepatitis A. They have not been shown to develop a response in time to prevent infection after having been exposed to the disease. They are effective however before exposure and are frequently recommended for people travelling to other countries, or to rural areas and camping sites where sanitation is poor.

What are the symptoms?

- Generally feeling unwell
- Tiredness and lack of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Stomach upsets and pains
- Mild fever
- General aches and pains
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dark urine
- Yellowing of skin and eyes

The time between contact with the infection and first symptoms is about 2 weeks but can be as long as 50 days.

If you have one or more of the symptoms listed above, please consult a doctor and tell them you have been a contact of someone with hepatitis A.

What to do if you suspect you might have Hepatitis A?

There are blood tests that can show a mild liver inflammation. There is also a test that shows new infection with the Hepatitis A virus. Your family doctor can arrange for these tests to be done. Your doctor will also advise regarding what foods should be avoided while sick. (These are fatty foods and alcohol drinks particularly)

The best way to prevent the spread of infection is careful hand washing with soap and proper drying, after using the toilet and before eating.

Infected people should not share food, drink bottles, cups or spoons with other people.

Careful hand washing with soap and drying after using the toilet and before handling food is most important.