

# Hepatitis A virus (HAV)

## What is it?

- Hepatitis A virus (HAV) is a virus that affects the liver. It is most common among school-aged children and young adults. Severity increases with age but complete recovery occurs in most cases.

## How is it spread?

- Usually by eating or drinking something that has been contaminated with the feces of someone with the virus such as a food handler or close personal contact.
- Exposure to food or water contaminated with HAV is another way that HAV is spread.
- Sexual partners with HAV can spread the virus to an uninfected person through activities such as oral-anal contact.
- HAV outbreaks have been caused by contaminated water, produce (salads, lettuce, strawberries, green onions, blueberries, sun-dried tomatoes, orange juice) and raw or undercooked shellfish harvested from contaminated water.
- Hepatitis A occurs worldwide but is more common in regions with poor sanitation and lack of safe food and water.

## What are the symptoms?

- Adults usually show symptoms which may include, sudden onset of fever, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-coloured stool, itchiness, tired, and generally not feeling well. This is usually followed by jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).
- Children do not usually show any signs or symptoms.
- HAV varies from a mild illness lasting 1 to 2 weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Most people recover with no complications or treatment. A small portion of those infected may have relapsing disease.

## When do symptoms start?

- Symptoms may appear 15-50 days after exposure to HAV, with an average of 28 days.

## How long is it contagious?

- HAV is most contagious during the two weeks before symptoms begin until a week after the onset of jaundice.

## How is it treated?

- Treatment is at the discretion of your health care provider. There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A, only supportive care to help relieve symptoms.

## How is it prevented?

- Vaccination is the best way to prevent HAV infection.
- Immune globulin is also recommended for some people to offer short-term protection against HAV.
- Good hand washing after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food is the best way to prevent spreading HAV.
- Safe travel information can be found at <http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/health-safety/diseases/hepatitis-a>.
- Those with HAV infection should avoid preparing food and sharing common food items with others.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables well, especially if eaten raw. Cook all seafood thoroughly.
- Do not drink water from an unsafe source.

## Should I go to childcare, school or work?

- Health care workers, child care staff, food handlers or those attending child care should be excluded from work or child care.
- Those without jaundice should stay home for 14 days after the onset of symptoms. Those with jaundice should stay home 7 days after it starts.

For further information, please contact the Communicable Disease Control Program staff at extension 5229.

## References:

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