

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of many hepatitis viruses. In British Columbia, the most common types are hepatitis A, B and C. Hepatitis A is most commonly passed through oral-fecal contact. The virus can be found in body fluids such as blood and stool.

Hepatitis A usually goes away on its own and is preventable with vaccination. Hepatitis A typically can last for several weeks, but rarely causes long-term health problems.

Causes

The hepatitis A is found in the stool of a person who has hepatitis A. It is passed when a person eats or drinks something that has come in contact with stools. Common ways the virus can be passed include:

- person-to-person contact, such as not washing hands after using the bathroom and then preparing or sharing food
- sexual activities involving fecal-oral contact (like rimming)
- contaminated water or ice
- contaminated fruits or other foods

If you plan to travel to a country where hepatitis A is common, you should get the hepatitis A vaccine before you go. You can also lower your chances of getting hepatitis A by avoiding uncooked foods and untreated tap water.

Stool and body fluids have the highest levels of the virus two weeks before symptoms start. During this time, it is easiest to pass on hepatitis A, although the virus can still be passed after symptoms start.

Symptoms

Symptoms for hepatitis A usually show up 15 to 50 days after exposure. The average time for symptoms is 4 weeks. The most common symptoms include:

- feeling sick to your stomach
- nausea and vomiting
- feeling very tired
- no appetite and weight loss
- abdominal pain
- fever and sore muscles
- jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)
- dark urine and grey stools

Children under 6 years of age often have no symptoms, and only a few children will develop jaundice.

Tests and Diagnosis

Testing for hepatitis A is usually done with a blood sample. Testing can check if your liver is inflamed and whether you have antibodies to hepatitis A. Antibodies show that you have come in contact with the virus.

It is best to get tested for hepatitis A if you have symptoms.

Window Period (how long to wait before testing):

Most test results are accurate 4 weeks after you come into contact with hepatitis A. In British Columbia, most test results should be ready in 10 days.

Treatment

In most cases, hepatitis A clears from the body on its own and most people get well within a few months. This type of hepatitis virus rarely leads to long-term illness or serious liver damage.

Prevention

You can protect yourself from hepatitis A by getting a vaccine. A combination vaccine is available that protects against both hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Hepatitis A immunoglobulin (IG) may be given to prevent hepatitis A in infants younger than one year, people with weak immune systems, and others who should not get the vaccine.

If you have hepatitis A, there are steps you can take to avoid passing it to people you are in close contact with:

- Tell people that you live with or have sex with that you have hepatitis A so they can talk to their health care provider about getting vaccinated.
- Wash your hands with soap and hot water immediately after using the toilet or changing a diaper, and before preparing food.
- Avoid any anal contact with a sex partner when you are ill with hepatitis A.

In some provinces, people with hepatitis A may not be able to work as food handlers or in daycares or health care facilities for two weeks after becoming sick, or for at least one week after the appearance of jaundice.

Resources

HealthLink BC – Information about the hepatitis A vaccine in multiple languages
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hepatitis-vaccine>

ImmunizeBC – Information about the hepatitis A vaccine
<https://immunizebc.ca/hepatitis-a>

CATIE – Hepatitis A factsheet

<http://www.catie.ca/en/fact-sheets/sti/hepatitis-a>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about hepatitis A

<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information

<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>