

Hepatitis A – Information resource for contacts

You have been identified as a close contact of someone who has confirmed hepatitis A while they were infectious.

The infectious period is from 2 weeks before the case develops symptoms until 1 week after jaundice appears.

What is Hepatitis A and how is it spread?

Hepatitis A is a viral infection that causes inflammation of the liver. It is usually spread through contact with an infected person's faeces (poo).

You can come into contact with this when you:

- drink contaminated water
- eat food prepared by someone with hepatitis A virus who did not wash their hands after going to the toilet
- have sexual contact with someone with the virus
- do not wash your hands after toileting.
- Only a small amount of virus is necessary to spread the infection. The virus can potentially survive on objects and in water for months.

Symptoms of Hepatitis A

It can take between 2 to 8 weeks for people to start feeling unwell after catching Hepatitis A. Young children can have the disease and never get any symptoms at all. Because of this, people may pass on the virus without knowing it.

Symptoms can include:

- Just feeling “unwell”
- Tiredness, lack of energy
- Not feeling like eating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Yellow skin or eyes (jaundice)
- Itchy skin
- Dark urine (pee)
- Very pale faeces (bowel motions, poo)
- Stomach pain (especially on the right side under the ribs)
- Mild fever
- General aches and pains

If you have been in contact with someone who had Hepatitis A and you get any of the above symptoms, please go and see your doctor.

Hepatitis A is more serious in adults and can last for several months. Most people recover completely from the infection, with no permanent damage to their liver.

Who are close contacts?

- Household contacts
- Sexual contacts
- Early Childcare Services employees and children attending the centre where the case attends
- Food handlers at the same premises that the case works at, or patrons who have eaten either uncooked or cooked foods there whilst the case was infectious
- Baby sitters and others involved in changing the nappies of children with hepatitis A virus.

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Are contacts checked for immunity?

Certain close contacts may be first checked for immunity to hepatitis A. This might include persons who were born in a country where there is a high incidence of hepatitis A.

Checks of immune status are only done (via blood test) where the contact is likely to be immune and a test can be done promptly.

A close contact would also be protected if they have completed a course of vaccine (2 doses) containing hepatitis A, or had previously been confirmed to have had hepatitis A.

Can Hepatitis A be prevented?

Depending on the circumstances you may be offered a choice between either an injection of hepatitis A vaccination or immunoglobulin.

Both hepatitis A vaccine and immunoglobulin are provided free, although if given at a medical centre there may be a service charge for the nurse giving the injection.

What is Hepatitis A vaccination?

Hepatitis A vaccine is based on inactivated (killed) virus and is safe and highly effective. It is regularly given to travellers who go to countries where there is a high risk of acquiring hepatitis A. There is also a combination vaccine that provides protection, especially for travellers, against both hepatitis A and B.

The vaccine is given via an intramuscular injection. A second dose – given at least 6 months and up to 24 months after the first dose – is necessary for long-term protection.

What is immunoglobulin?

Immunoglobulin is a technical word for antibodies – pre-formed natural proteins made by the body's immune system to help fight infections. Normal immunoglobulin is a product from human blood plasma.

It is given to you via an injection into the buttock or thigh muscle.

It provides immediate protection; or if you are already developing hepatitis A the symptoms may be milder. The protective effect only lasts several weeks or months.

Because immunoglobulin is a blood product it could possibly pass on some infections. However, it has a very good history of safety from injection for over 50 years. Important infections such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B and hepatitis C are tested for in every blood donation and have never been spread by immunoglobulin made in New Zealand. The manufacturing process is also able to destroy or remove these and many other viruses.

There is no evidence that Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (CJD) has ever been passed on by blood products. If there is a risk it is too small to measure.

Severe side effects are rare but mild side effects, such as local soreness, stiffness and redness at the injection site, are common.

You will be asked to sign a consent form because you are receiving a human blood product.

It is important to note that while both hepatitis A vaccine and immunoglobulin are both effective, in rare situations a person could still develop hepatitis A and so you need to be aware of the signs and symptoms.