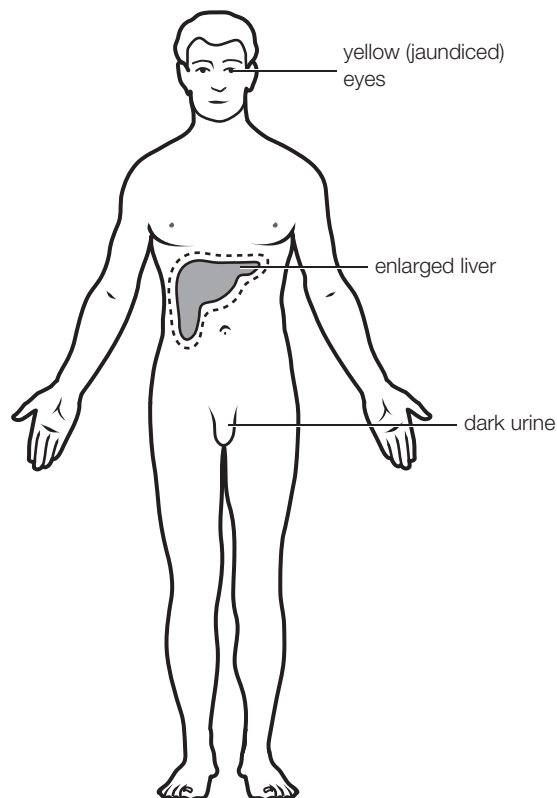


Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, also known as *infectious hepatitis* and *yellow jaundice*, is a viral infection of the liver. *Hepatitis* means inflammation of the liver. Unlike most other types of hepatitis, hepatitis A invades the liver after it enters the body from the bowel by taking in infected food or water.

It is quite different to hepatitis B and hepatitis C.



Signs of hepatitis A

What are the symptoms?

The main sign is yellow skin (jaundice) due to a building up of the waste pigment *bilirubin* in the body. Another is darkening of the urine and pale faeces. A flu-like illness may be noticed before the jaundice, including loss of appetite, nausea, fever, muscle aches and pains. Some people may never have symptoms while others may have abdominal pain. It is diagnosed by a simple blood test.

How serious is it?

Hepatitis A is usually a mild disease, especially in children, although some cases can be severe. Complete recovery is usual, but some people can be left with chronic hepatitis and liver damage.

How is it spread?

The virus is present in the bowel and is spread from person to person through close contact such as infected hands, towels and food, especially from contaminated water and shellfish. That is, it gets from the faeces of the infected person to the mouth of another. It may take 15 to 50 days after picking up the virus before the disease becomes evident, with 28 days being the average time.

The patient is most infectious 2 weeks before and 1 week after the onset of jaundice.

Hepatitis A is more likely to be contracted overseas in a Third World country with poor hygiene.

How is the spread prevented?

A few simple measures based on strict hygiene can stop the disease spreading to close contacts and family members. These are:

- Wash your hands carefully after using the toilet and disinfect them with antiseptic. Also disinfect the bathroom doorknob.
- Clean bathrooms and toilets often, especially toilet seats, handles and taps.
- Do not handle food with your fingers.
- Do not share crockery and cutlery during meals.
- Protect food from flies.
- Do not use tea-towels to dry dishes.
- All family members should wash their hands often and carefully.

Note: Normal dishwashing and hot-water laundering is sufficient to sterilise your crockery, cutlery, clothing and bed linen.

Scrupulous personal hygiene is *extremely* important to stop the spread of infection. Food-counter employees should not handle food as well as money.

Gamma globulin injection

Your doctor may advise that each member of your family be given an injection of immunoglobulin, which protects against hepatitis for 3 months. The injection should be given within a week of exposure.

Immunisation

People can now be immunised against hepatitis A by a course of 2 injections.

What is the treatment?

Even though the disease may be mild, medical advice is essential. Rest is very important. It is best to stay in bed until the jaundice begins to fade, but you can get up to shower, bathe and use the toilet. Try to maintain a nutritious diet and drink lots of water (at least 8 glasses a day). Do not drink alcohol until you have recovered. If fatty foods upset your stomach, avoid them until you feel better. Your doctor may recommend that you stop taking certain medications (e.g. the contraceptive pill).