

# Hepatitis A

## What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis is a general word for an inflamed liver. It has many causes including viral infections, medications and alcohol. Hepatitis A is a virus that can infect and cause damage to the liver.

## What does my liver do?

Your liver is an important organ. It is responsible for:

- storing vitamins, minerals, iron and sugars;
- breaking down food;
- making essential proteins;
- breaking down harmful chemicals.

## How can I catch Hepatitis A?

Most infections are caused by consuming contaminated food or water in high risk countries. The infection can also be contracted from oral-anal contact with someone who has the infection. There are reports of outbreaks in injecting drug users.

## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis A?

Most people will have little or no symptoms. Some people will have a flu type illness with fevers, muscle aches, tiredness and tummy pain. Yellowing of the skin (jaundice) may occur and some people can experience nausea and may vomit. These symptoms can last for up to three weeks.

## Will I be infected for life?

No. The majority of healthy adults who catch Hepatitis A will clear the virus completely within a few weeks with no long term problems.

## Is Hepatitis A serious?

Hepatitis A can be serious. For most people the acute infection is not serious (and some people will not remember any symptoms). However, a small number of people (<1 in 200) can develop a severe infection which can lead to liver failure.

## Is Hepatitis A easy to diagnose?

Yes. A simple blood tests can show whether you have Hepatitis A or whether you are immune to infection.

### How can I prevent Hepatitis A?

An effective vaccination is available against Hepatitis A. This consists of a course of two vaccinations. The second vaccination should ideally be given within 12 months of the first otherwise the immunity is not long lasting. You should have both vaccinations to give yourself the best chance of protection.

The injections are usually given into the muscle of your upper arm. They are slightly uncomfortable at the time and some people have a sore arm for some hours after the injection. Other side-effects are very uncommon.

### How effective is the vaccination?

The majority of adults will be immune to Hepatitis A after receiving the doses of the vaccine.

A small number of people do not respond to the vaccine. More rarely the virus can sometimes infect people despite a good response to the vaccination, so it is important to take general precautions to prevent infection such as:

- safer sex (including using condoms for oral-anal sex);
- ensure high levels of personal hygiene (wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food);
- avoid eating raw or inadequately cooked salads, vegetables, ice cream, peeled fruit and the shellfish when you travel abroad;
- check whether it is safe to drink tap water before you travel abroad;
- avoid ice in drinks when travelling abroad if you are not sure where the water to make the ice has come from.

### Who should be vaccinated?

- All homosexual or bisexual men.
- People with Hepatitis B and/or C.
- Injecting drug users.
- Patients with chronic liver disease.

The vaccine can be given to anyone in the above groups at Sexual Health Dorset or at your GP, free of charge.

If you are travelling to a high risk country, or have been in contact with someone with acute Hepatitis A and you are not in one of the above groups, you should see your GP or a travel clinic to access the vaccination.

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Produced: Oct-20  
Version: L033\v1\Oct-20

Review Date: Oct-23

Website: <https://sexualhealthdorset.org/>

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