

HEPATITIS A & B

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A disease?

Hepatitis A is an infection of the liver caused by a virus (germ). Hepatitis A disease occurs in Canada and all over the world. It is very common, or endemic, in most parts of the world. Most people who get hepatitis A disease recover in about one month; however, sometimes it can take 6 to 12 months to get better. In rare cases, the illness can be severe enough to cause death. People with a history of chronic liver disease are more likely to have severe illness. Once a person has recovered from hepatitis A disease they are protected from getting the infection again.

How is hepatitis A spread?

The virus is found mostly in the stool of the infected person. It is most often spread through contaminated food or water. People who prepare food can spread the disease if they are infected with the virus and don't wash their hands properly (fecal-oral route).

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A and B infection?

The symptoms for one person can be different than for another. Some people, especially young children may get hepatitis A infection without noticing any symptoms. The symptoms both hepatitis A and B appear slowly and may include:

- tiredness
- poor appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pain fever
- dark-coloured urine
- light-coloured stools
- yellowing of eyes and skin

For hepatitis B, symptoms may begin 6 to 25 weeks after contact with hepatitis B and may last for up to 3 months. Most people recover completely. Some people become "carriers" and will have the virus for the rest of their lives. Carriers have no symptoms and many do not know they are carriers. Some carriers develop liver problems like cirrhosis or cancer. Hepatitis B is diagnosed through blood tests.

Can hepatitis A be treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. However, it can be prevented with the use of hepatitis A vaccine.

What is hepatitis A vaccine?

Hepatitis A vaccine is very effective in preventing hepatitis A infection. The series consists of two injections given 6 to 12 months apart. About three weeks after the first dose of the vaccine, 99 percent of people will have protection lasting for about one year. After the second dose, the protection lasts at least 20 years. Hepatitis A vaccine is safe. You cannot get hepatitis A disease from the vaccine.

Who should get the vaccine?

People at risk for getting the hepatitis A virus. This includes:

- users of illegal drugs, both oral and injection
- men who have sex with men
- travellers to countries outside of Canada and the United States

People who are at greater risk for complications from hepatitis A infection. This includes:

- people with chronic liver disease (people with hepatitis C, carriers of the hepatitis B virus, and those with cirrhosis)
- people receiving plasma-derived replacement clotting factors (e.g., people with hemophilia)

Talk to a nurse at the Public Health Centre before getting the vaccine if:

- you are sick right now with something more serious than a cold
- you have a fever
- you are pregnant. Pregnant women are not usually given vaccines but hepatitis A vaccine may be used in pregnancy if there is a high risk of hepatitis A disease.

What are the possible side effects from hepatitis A vaccine?

Most people have little or no reaction to this vaccine. Reactions that do occur are usually mild, such as redness, tenderness or swelling where the needle was given. Occasionally, headache and mild fever may occur. Reactions usually are gone in 24 to 48 hours. As with any immunization, unexpected or unusual side effects such as a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) can occur. Such serious reactions are very rare.

What should you do if you have a reaction to the vaccine?

Apply a cool moist towel where the needle was given. Using acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) if a fever and/or pain develops. Aspirin (ASA) is not recommended for persons less than 18 years of age.

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a potentially serious disease of the liver caused by a virus. This disease can cause liver damage. Hepatitis B is found world-wide and higher risk areas include: Africa, Asia, parts of South and Central America, some Pacific Islands.

How is hepatitis B disease spread?

Hepatitis B disease is spread from an infected person to another through contact with infected blood, semen, or vaginal secretions. For example:

- sex without a condom (oral, anal, or vaginal)
- sharing items that may have blood on them (e.g., toothbrush, razor, nail clippers)
- injected drugs with shared needles
- sharing body piercing or tattooing equipment
- accidental needle-stick injuries
- blood transfusions that have not been screened for the hepatitis B virus
- birth: from mother to baby

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

- Get vaccinated for hepatitis B.
- Avoid contact with other people's blood and body fluids.
- Always use condoms for any sexual activity.
- Make sure needle packages are sterile for drugs, tattooing, and piercing.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or nail clippers.
- Careful cleaning of blood/body fluid spills (e.g., use gloves and a 1:9 bleach solution).

How is the hepatitis B vaccine given?

Three doses usually give lifelong protection. It can be given alone or as a Twinrix vaccine (hepatitis A and B combined).

Primary Vaccination	Interval
1st dose	-
2nd dose	At least 1 month after the 1st dose
3rd dose	At least 4-5 months after the 2nd dose
Booster	Not routinely needed

To get more information, contact your family doctor or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Health Link Alberta at 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free. Mandarin Health Link Calgary 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link Calgary 403-943-1556.

Source: Health Link Alberta website, www.healthlinkalberta.ca

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