

# Hepatitis A

## Summary

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by the hepatitis A virus, which can be sexually transmitted. Hepatitis A infection can cause inflammation of the liver (hepatitis).

Hepatitis A is passed when feces (stool, shit, poo) of a person with the virus comes into contact with the mouth of another person. The most common routes of transmission are sexual contact or ingesting (eating or drinking) contaminated food or water.

Hepatitis A typically clears up on its own within two months of infection.

A simple blood test can determine if an individual currently has a hepatitis A infection or has immunity to hepatitis A (after recovering from a past infection or being vaccinated).

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A is preventable with vaccination.

Routine hygiene (washing hands thoroughly after toilet use), and correct and consistent use of condoms and oral dams for sexual activity involving the anus, can reduce the risk of getting or passing on hepatitis A.

Key messages on hepatitis A for clients are available at the end of this fact sheet.

**The words we use here** – CATIE is committed to using language that is relevant to everyone. People use different terms to describe their genitals. This text uses medical terms, such as vagina and penis, to describe genitals. Cisgender<sup>i</sup> people can often identify with these terms. Some trans people<sup>ii</sup> may use other terms, such as front hole and strapless. CATIE acknowledges and respects that people use words that they are most comfortable with.

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Published  
2023

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## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by the hepatitis A virus, which can be sexually transmitted.

The hepatitis A virus infects a type of liver cell called hepatocytes. This infection can interfere with usual liver functions, causing inflammation of the liver (hepatitis).<sup>1,2</sup>

## How is hepatitis A transmitted?

Hepatitis A is found in the feces (stool, shit, poo) from people with hepatitis A. The virus is passed on when the feces of an infected person makes its way into the mouth of another person (fecal-oral contact) who is not immune. Even microscopic (very tiny, invisible) amounts of feces can transmit hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A can be spread by sexual activities involving fecal-oral contact. This includes direct contact between the mouth and anus (rimming). Hepatitis A can also be passed on indirectly when a finger, penis, or sex toy that has been in contact with one person's anus, then enters another person's mouth. Handling a used condom after anal sex and then putting fingers in the mouth can also transmit hepatitis A.

Hepatitis A can also be passed on when a person ingests food or water that has been contaminated with the feces of someone with hepatitis A.<sup>1,3-5</sup>

## Who is at risk?

Anyone can get a hepatitis A infection.

Some groups carry a higher burden of hepatitis A (it is more common). These include:

- people who use drugs (injection and non-injection drugs)
- gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM)
- children in daycare (who are often in diapers or around other children who are in diapers and are not able to wash their own hands)
- individuals in close contact (sexual or non-sexual) with a person with hepatitis A

- individuals from, or who have visited, regions where hepatitis A is common, or where sanitation systems (sewage, tap water) are poor

People with chronic liver disease are at increased risk of severe symptoms or complications if they get hepatitis A.<sup>1-4</sup>

## Symptoms

Not everyone who gets hepatitis A experiences symptoms. Symptoms typically appear two to six weeks after getting the virus (the incubation period). The onset of symptoms may happen quickly.

Common symptoms include:

- loss of appetite
- nausea
- abdominal pain
- fatigue
- fever
- light-coloured stool
- dark urine
- jaundice (yellowing of the skin and/or eyes)

Children under the age of six often have no symptoms or display only mild symptoms.

Most people clear the infection on their own within two months.

After a person recovers from an infection, they are usually immune to hepatitis A for life.

A person also becomes immune if they are vaccinated against hepatitis A.<sup>1,4,6,7</sup>

## Complications

The majority of people who get a hepatitis A infection make a full recovery without any treatment.

However, some people develop complications that may require hospitalization. In rare instances, hepatitis A can cause liver failure or death.

Some people experience prolonged jaundice and/or recurring jaundice over several months.

Hepatitis A can sometimes cause chronic liver damage or disease, but this is uncommon.<sup>1-3</sup>

## Testing and diagnosis

Blood tests can reveal if an individual currently has a hepatitis A infection or has immunity to hepatitis A. A person becomes immune if they previously recovered from a hepatitis A infection or were vaccinated. Hepatitis A tests look for antibodies in the blood.<sup>4</sup>

## Notification of partners

Hepatitis A is a reportable infection in Canada. This means that when an infection is confirmed by a clinic, healthcare provider or laboratory, it must be reported to public health authorities. When someone has a confirmed hepatitis A diagnosis, the healthcare provider or public health staff will ask them to contact or provide contact information for all people who may have been exposed during the period of infection, including sexual partners and people living in the same household. The name of the original client is not given to their sexual partner(s) when they are contacted by public health.

The healthcare provider or public health staff will attempt to contact these individuals and encourage them to be tested. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) recommends that all people contacted be tested to assess their immune status and/or to provide vaccine protection to those who are not immune.<sup>8</sup>

## Treatment

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. People with hepatitis A are usually advised to rest and reduce their activity levels. They are also advised to drink plenty of water, eat healthy foods, and avoid alcohol and drugs.<sup>2,3</sup>

## What about HIV?

Having a hepatitis A infection does not increase the risk of getting HIV or passing it on to someone else. However, people living with HIV who get a hepatitis A infection may experience more severe symptoms or take longer to recover.<sup>3</sup>

## Prevention

The hepatitis A vaccine is the most effective way to prevent getting hepatitis A. The vaccine is over 90% effective when given to people who have not been exposed to hepatitis A. PHAC recommends vaccination for individuals at higher risk of getting hepatitis A.

Correct and consistent use of condoms reduces the risk of transmitting hepatitis A during sexual activities involving the anus. There are two types of condoms available. The external condom (sometimes called the “male” condom) is a sheath made from polyurethane, latex or polyisoprene that covers the penis during sex. The internal condom (sometimes called the insertive or “female” condom) is a pouch made of polyurethane or a synthetic latex material called nitrile that can be inserted into the vagina or rectum.

Some trans men may cut a condom or oral dam to fit their genitals.

The use of condoms or oral dams can reduce the risk of hepatitis A during oral sex or rimming.

When sharing a sex toy, cleaning the sex toy and putting a new condom on it between each use can reduce the risk of passing on hepatitis A.

Washing hands after handling a condom, glove, oral dam or sex toy can also help to reduce the risk of transmission.

Proper sanitation and hygiene practices (such as washing hands after using the toilet) can also help reduce the risk of transmission.

The notification, testing and treatment of all sexual partners of an individual with hepatitis A all help to prevent its spread.<sup>1,3,8-10</sup>

## Notes

i Cisgender – someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth

ii Transgender – an umbrella term that describes people with diverse gender identities and gender expressions that do not conform to stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a girl/woman or boy/man in society

(Definitions taken from *Creating Authentic Spaces: A gender identity and gender expression toolkit to support the implementation of institutional and social change*, published by The 519, Toronto, Ontario.)

## Resources

Condoms for the prevention of HIV – *fact sheet*

Safer Sex Guide – *client resource*

Viral STI basics – *client resource*

Oral Sex – *client resource*

Sexually Transmitted Infections – *booklet (Public Health Agency of Canada)*

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**This fact sheet was developed in partnership with the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).**

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# What you need to know about hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by the hepatitis A virus, which can be sexually transmitted. The virus is passed on when feces (stool, poo, shit) from a person who has hepatitis A gets into the mouth of another person. Hepatitis A affects the liver. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A, but there is no specific treatment for hepatitis A infection. Most people recover from hepatitis A on their own. There are ways to reduce the chances of getting or passing on hepatitis A, such as getting vaccinated, practicing good hygiene, and using a condom, glove or oral dam during any type of sexual contact with the anus (such as penis-anus, finger-anus or mouth-anus contact).

**The words we use here** – CATIE is committed to using language that is relevant to everyone. People use different terms to describe their bodies. This text uses medical terms, such as vagina and penis, to describe genitals. Some people may use other terms, such as private parts or dick or front hole. CATIE acknowledges and respects that people use words that they are most comfortable with.

## What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by the hepatitis A virus, which can be sexually transmitted. The virus infects the liver. A person with hepatitis A can pass it on if their feces (stool, poo, shit) gets into the mouth of another person.

Most adults with hepatitis A have some symptoms. Symptoms can take two to six weeks to appear. Common symptoms include:

- fatigue
- loss of appetite
- nausea or abdominal pain
- fever
- yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice)

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Published  
2023

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- light-coloured stool
- dark urine (pee)

Most adults recover from hepatitis A infection on their own within two months.

## Am I at risk of getting hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is passed when feces (stool, poo, shit) of a person with hepatitis A makes its way into the mouth of another person.

Hepatitis A can be passed on during sex:

- through oral-anal contact (rimming)
- when body parts (fingers, penis) or sex toys come into contact with infected feces and then enter a person's mouth
- when someone handles a used condom after anal sex and then puts their fingers into their own mouth or another person's mouth

Some groups carry a higher burden of hepatitis A. These include gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM), people who use drugs, people who travel to regions where hepatitis A is common, and people in close contact (sexual or non-sexual) with someone who has hepatitis A. Children in daycare are also at risk because they are around other children in diapers and may not be able to wash their own hands.

## Hepatitis A and HIV

People living with HIV may have more severe symptoms if they have a hepatitis A infection, or may take longer to recover.

Someone who has hepatitis A is not at greater risk of getting or passing on HIV.

## What can I do?

### Prevent infection

Get the hepatitis A vaccine. This is the most effective way to prevent getting hepatitis A. A hepatitis A vaccine is widely available and is highly effective. Vaccination is especially important for

people at increased risk of infection or severe symptoms.

Use a condom during insertive vaginal and anal sex.

Use an oral dam during oral-anal sex (rimming).

When sharing a sex toy, wash the sex toy and put a new condom on it between each use.

Wash your hands after:

- handling a condom, glove, oral dam or sex toy
- using the toilet or any other time your hands touch your anus or another person's anus

### Get tested

The only way to know whether or not you have hepatitis A is to get tested. You should get tested if you experience symptoms of hepatitis A or if you have a current or recent sex partner diagnosed with hepatitis A.

Consider getting tested if you:

- engage in sexual activities involving the anus (anal sex, rimming, fingering, sharing sex toys)
- are in close household contact with a person diagnosed with hepatitis A (such as eating together)
- have visited (or plan to visit) a region where hepatitis A is common, or where sanitation systems (sewage, tap water) are poor

A healthcare provider can do the test. The test involves providing a blood sample. Tests can reveal if you currently have hepatitis A, or if you are immune to it (from a past infection or vaccination).

It is a good idea to also get tested for other sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs), including HIV, when you get tested for hepatitis A. Some STBBIs can be passed on in the same ways as hepatitis A. Talk to your healthcare provider about how often you should get tested for hepatitis A and other STBBIs.

If you are diagnosed with hepatitis A, a healthcare provider will talk to you about informing your sex partners and household contacts that they might have been exposed to the virus, and encouraging



them to get tested. Your identity will not be revealed.

Hepatitis A cannot be cured but most adults will recover from the infection on their own.

Once the infection clears, most people become immune from hepatitis A for life.

**This information sheet was developed in partnership with the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).**



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