

# Hepatitis A

## Key facts

- Hepatitis A is a viral liver disease that causes mild to severe illness.
- The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is transmitted through ingestion of contaminated food and water or through direct contact with an infectious person.
- Most people recover fully from hepatitis A with a lifelong immunity. However, a very small proportion could die from fulminant hepatitis.
- The risk of hepatitis A infection is associated with a lack of safe water, and poor sanitation and hygiene (such as dirty hands).
- A safe and effective vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis A.
- Safe water supply, food safety, improved sanitation, hand washing and the hepatitis A vaccine are the most effective ways to combat the disease.

## Disease epidemiology

- Hepatitis A is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. The virus is primarily spread when an uninfected (and unvaccinated) person ingests food or water that is contaminated with the faeces of an infected person. The disease is closely associated with unsafe water or food, inadequate sanitation and poor personal hygiene. Hepatitis A occurs sporadically and epidemically worldwide, with a tendency to cyclic recurrences.
- Worldwide, HAV infections account for 1.4 million cases annually
- Epidemics are uncommon in developing countries where adults are generally immune. Improved sanitation and hygiene conditions in different parts of the world leave large segments of the population susceptible to infection, and outbreaks may result whenever the virus is introduced.
- Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A infection does not cause chronic liver disease and is rarely fatal, but it can cause debilitating symptoms and fulminant hepatitis (acute liver failure), which is often fatal.
- Geographical distribution of areas can be based on the level of HAV infections, such as those having high, intermediate or low levels of hepatitis A infection.
- Most parts of India have high hepatitis A endemicity. Although a few pockets of lower seroprevalence in high-income urban areas are emerging with socio-economic development, these higher risk people make up only a small portion of the total population of India.

## Transmission

- Hepatitis A virus is usually transmitted by the faecal-oral route, either through person-to-person contact or through ingestion of contaminated food or water.
- The virus can also be transmitted through close physical contact with an infectious person, although casual contact among people does not spread the virus.

## Symptoms

- Symptoms of hepatitis A include fever, malaise, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark-colored urine and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).
- Symptoms can appear anywhere from 2 to 6 weeks after exposure and usually last less than 2 months, although some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.
- Some who are infected may not have any symptoms at all.

## At-risk populations

- At-risk populations include those who have not received vaccination or have not been previously infected with hepatitis A virus.
- Risk factors include: poor sanitation, lack of safe water, living in a household with an infected person, being a sexual partner of someone with acute hepatitis A infection or travelling to areas of high endemicity without being immunized.

## Diagnosis

- Cases of hepatitis A are not clinically distinguishable from other types of acute viral hepatitis.
- Specific diagnosis is made by the detection of HAV-specific IgM antibodies in the blood.

## Treatment

- There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A.
- Recovery from symptoms following infection may be slow and may take several weeks to several months.
- Therapy is aimed at maintaining comfort and adequate nutritional balance, including replacement of fluids that are lost from vomiting and diarrhoea.

## Prevention

- Improved sanitation food safety and immunization are the most effective ways to combat hepatitis A.
- The spread of hepatitis A can be reduced by providing access to safe drinking water, ensuring proper disposal of sewage within communities and promoting personal hygiene practices such as regular hand-washing with safe water.
- Several hepatitis A vaccines are now commercially available. However, no vaccine is licensed for children younger than one year of age.
- Nearly 100% of people develop protective levels of antibodies to the virus within one month after a single dose of the vaccine. Manufacturers still recommend two vaccine doses to ensure a longer-term protection of about five to eight years after vaccination.
- Whether or not to include the vaccine in routine childhood immunizations depends on the local context. The proportion of susceptible people in the population and the level of exposure to the virus should be considered. Generally speaking, countries with intermediate endemicity will benefit the most from universal immunization of children. Countries with low endemicity may consider vaccinating high-risk adults. In countries with high endemicity, the use of vaccine is limited as most adults are naturally immune.
- Therefore hepatitis A vaccination is currently not a national policy in India.

WHO organizes World Hepatitis Day on 28 July every year to increase awareness and understanding of viral hepatitis.