

# Hepatitis A:

## What you need to know

### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is a term that means inflammation of the liver. In many cases, hepatitis is caused by viruses, and this is known as **viral hepatitis**. Viral hepatitis can be either an **acute** infection (infection lasting less than 6 months) or a **chronic** infection (infection lasting longer than 6 months).

There are five main type of hepatitis viruses that cause hepatitis, known as types **A, B, C, D, and E**.



In Canada, the hepatitis A, B, and C viruses cause 90% of acute hepatitis infections. Only hepatitis A infection and hepatitis B infection can be prevented by vaccination.

### Hepatitis A: An overview

The hepatitis A virus causes hepatitis A. It is mainly spread by coming into contact with an **infected person's feces** – such as by drinking contaminated water. Rarely, the virus can be transmitted through blood or blood products. Hepatitis A is always an acute infection but it does not cause chronic infection. Cases of hepatitis A have declined in Canada due to the success of immunization programs. However, hepatitis A infections are still common worldwide and cases do occur in Canada. Globally, it is estimated that **tens of millions** of people catch hepatitis A every year.

### Memory Aid

Causes of viral hepatitis: An overview of hepatitis A versus hepatitis B

Name of infection	Cause of infection	Result of infection	Where the virus lives in the body	Possible duration of infection
Hepatitis A	Hepatitis A virus	Inflammation of the liver (hepatitis)*	Feces and blood	Acute (less than 6 months)
Hepatitis B	Hepatitis B virus	Inflammation of the liver (hepatitis)*	The blood and some bodily fluids (e.g., semen, vaginal fluid, and saliva)	Acute (less than 6 months) Chronic (longer than 6 months)

\*This is a generalized statement as there are differences between the symptoms and severity of hepatitis A and B infections. For more information about hepatitis B, please see our hepatitis B factsheet.

# Hepatitis A: What you need to know

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Many people living with hepatitis A will not have any symptoms, or will have only mild symptoms. If they do develop symptoms, these can include:

- fever,
- fatigue,
- loss in appetite,
- nausea,
- stomach pain,
- dark urine, and
- yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

In typical cases of hepatitis A, symptoms appear on average **28 days** (but can be up to 50 days) after exposure to the hepatitis A virus, and usually last less than **2 months**. The body rids itself of the hepatitis A virus within **6 months**.

In severe cases of hepatitis A, symptoms can last for **several months** and be **debilitating**. In rare cases, hepatitis A can also lead to **liver failure and death**.

## How does hepatitis A spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters the body mainly through the **mouth**. It is usually spread by coming into contact with an **infected person's feces** – for example, by drinking, or eating food that was made using, contaminated water, performing oral sex on the anus (rimming), or touching feces particles and then touching your mouth (e.g., touching an object someone who did not wash their hands had touched earlier).

Uncommonly, hepatitis A can also be spread through **blood**, such as by sharing needles.



For more information on how to prevent catching and spreading hepatitis A, please read CATIE's factsheet on hepatitis A: <https://www.catie.ca/hepatitis-a>.

## Who is at risk?

While **anyone** can catch hepatitis A, there are certain factors that put people more at risk for experiencing severe infection. Those more at risk for severe infection include people:

- with chronic liver disease,
- who are immunocompromised (have a weakened immune system), or
- who are over the age of 60.

### Good to know!

An estimated **44% to 55%** of reported hepatitis A cases in Canada are due to persons travelling to places where hepatitis A is common. The best way to protect yourself is to get immunized.

# Hepatitis A: What you need to know

## Who should be immunized?

Anyone who wants to lower their risk of hepatitis A infection should be immunized against this disease. Below is a list of people for whom immunization is particularly recommended.

<b>People/groups disproportionately affected by hepatitis A should be immunized, including:</b>	
Anyone travelling to countries where hepatitis A is common	Zookeepers, veterinarians, and researchers who work with and handle primates
People living in communities where hepatitis A is common, or in communities where it may spread	Military personnel and humanitarian relief workers who are likely to work in areas where hepatitis A is common
Household contacts or close contacts of children adopted from countries where hepatitis A is common	Anyone who uses injectable substances
Persons who may be exposed to the hepatitis A vaccine through work (e.g., researchers or vaccine manufacturers)	Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM)*
People receiving repeated replacement of plasma-derived clotting factors	* There is little information on how affected transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary people are by hepatitis A.
<b>Anyone at increased risk for experiencing severe hepatitis A infection should also be immunized (please see the section <i>Who is at risk?</i>).</b>	



If you think you have been exposed to hepatitis A, talk to your healthcare professional about whether or not you need to get immunized immediately against this disease. Because the time from exposure to onset of symptoms can be long (15-50 days), you may have time to get protection from the hepatitis A vaccine and prevent the disease.

## Are you protected against hepatitis A?



**The hepatitis A vaccines are safe and the best way to protect against this infection.**

Talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or local public health office about getting immunized against hepatitis A.

### References

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