

Hepatitis A is a viral disease which affects the liver. Symptoms include fever, chills, weakness, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal discomfort, followed within a few days by jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). The urine may become dark and the stools pale. Many infections, particularly in children, are mild. Occasionally, jaundice may be severe and liver failure may occur; in adults up to 2% of cases are fatal. In general the severity of the disease increases with age. Past infection with hepatitis A gives life-long immunity.

How do you catch hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A usually occurs through eating or drinking food and water contaminated with human faeces. It can also occur after exposure to contaminated water or ice, undercooked shellfish harvested from sewage contaminated water or from fruit and raw vegetables. Direct person to person contact can also occur. The virus is shed in faeces of infected people. Food handlers who do not practice good personal hygiene can contaminate foods. The disease occurs worldwide, but is more common in developing countries with poor sanitation and overcrowding.

Incubation period

The incubation period can vary between 15 to 50 days but averages 28 days.

Diagnosis

A blood test for specific hepatitis A antibodies is necessary to confirm diagnosis.

Prevention

An effective vaccine is available which provides virtually 100% protection. Travellers can minimise the risk of exposure to hepatitis A by avoiding contaminated food and water and taking particular care with personal hygiene. A blood test is available to detect hepatitis A antibodies for those who have a history of jaundice or who have lived abroad in endemic areas for long periods.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A.



This information is produced by MASTA as a general guide to be used in conjunction with advice from your doctor or nurse. To obtain a health brief tailored to your journey visit a MASTA associated travel clinic or www.masta-travel-health.com