

HEPATITIS A

WHAT IS HEPATITIS

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It can be due to many different causes, such as infections, systemic diseases (like Systemic Lupus Erythematosus), drug overdose (including Paracetamol) and eating poisonous mushrooms.

Many different viruses can cause hepatitis, including *Cytomegalovirus*, *Epstein-Barr virus*, *Varicella*, *Rubella*, *Adenovirus* and *HIV*. However, when we commonly speak of viral hepatitis, it usually refers to infection by one of five different viruses, called the Hepatitis A, B, C, D or E viruses.

In common parlance, viral hepatitis is commonly referred to simply as “Jaundice”. Jaundice is a yellowish discoloration of the skin, mucous membranes and other tissues. It can occur with or without hepatitis and be due to various causes, including infections by viruses, malaria, leptospirosis, gall bladder stones, certain blood disorders and other systemic disorders.

The rest of this article is about hepatitis caused by the Hepatitis A virus. Hepatitis B, C and E are dealt with in separate articles.

HOW IS IT HEPATITIS A SPREAD

The Hepatitis A virus is excreted in the stool of patients and spreads from person to person because of poor hygiene. Since children, especially those who have not yet been toilet trained, by nature lack personal hygiene, the infection spreads easily within day care centers and play schools. The infection can also be spread by those who prepare and handle food, if they have poor personal hygiene. Water borne outbreaks also occur and this is a serious issue in developing countries, including India, where public sanitation and clean drinking water supplies are inadequate.

WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF HEPATITIS A

The infection occurs in all ages, from young children to adults. In endemic areas, such as India, it is estimated that almost all children will have been infected by the age of 5 years. The virus affects the liver and causes varying degrees of liver damage.

The incubation period is about 4 weeks. Most infections in children below 5 years are asymptomatic – that is, the infection occurs without causing any symptoms and therefore the child or parent may not even know that infection has occurred. In older individuals, symptoms can be more severe.

When symptoms do occur, the onset is usually sudden, with fever, malaise, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite and abdominal pain or discomfort. Diarrhea may occur in children but older persons usually have constipation. Jaundice occurs but may be so mild that it can be detected only by laboratory tests. In more severe cases, the jaundice is clearly visible as a yellow discoloration of the whites of the eyes, mucous membranes

and dark colored urine. The stools may be whitish or clay colored. The symptoms usually last less than a month and the patient gradually recovers.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF HEPATITIS A

Hepatitis A is usually a mild disease and almost all previously healthy patients recover completely.

However, complications have been reported and these include suppression of the bone marrow, ulceration of the small intestine, pancreatitis, myocarditis, kidney and joint involvement. Very rarely, it can result in death.

HOW IS IT TREATED

Treatment is entirely supportive and there is no specific agent that will act on the virus. Any child with jaundice will have certain blood tests performed to identify the cause and assess the degree of liver involvement. Drugs that can further damage the liver should be avoided.

Unless the illness is extremely severe, the patient can be treated at home. Bed rest and fluids are prudent. Most patients will have loss of appetite but can eat whatever they feel like, including fatty foods if it agrees with them.

Adults with hepatitis due to any cause should not consume alcohol for many months, until the liver has recovered completely.

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS

Generally, most persons with Hepatitis A infection recover completely, without any long-term effects. One attack provides long lasting immunity against further episodes.

CAN IT BE PREVENTED

Personal hygiene and hand washing are extremely important in preventing spread of the disease. The disease can easily spread between close family members and therefore everyone must be aware of the importance of hand washing after using the toilet and before eating.

If someone has been exposed to the illness and they are at risk of having complications (such as those already having underlying liver disease), an injection of Immunoglobulin may help prevent or reduce the severity of illness.

An effective vaccine is available against the disease. This is called *Havrix*. The vaccine can be given only to adults and children over the age of 2 years. The vaccination schedule consists of two injections given 6 – 12 months apart and provides nearly 100% protection. Though vaccination against Hepatitis A is not part of the regular childhood immunization schedule, it is preferable that all children get the vaccine.