

Hepatitis A Vaccine

Public Health – Fact Sheet

Immunization is one of the most important accomplishments in public health. Immunizations help in eliminating and controlling the spread of infections and diseases. Vaccines help your immune system to recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause disease.

What is hepatitis A disease?

Hepatitis A is an acute liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV).

Some people, especially young children, never know they have hepatitis A because they don't develop any symptoms. Others can develop a range of symptoms from mild to severe. If symptoms do develop, the onset is abrupt, and can include fever, loss of appetite, feeling very tired, nausea and vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, dark urine and/or clay-coloured stools. They can also have yellow skin and eyes (jaundice). Symptoms of hepatitis A usually develop within 14 to 28 days after being exposed to the HAV but can occur up to 50 days after the exposure.

People with mild symptoms often recover within one to two weeks. The illness can be more severe in some people, especially in those that have a weakened immune system, those with chronic liver disease, and people over the age of 60 years. Those with a severe illness can have symptoms for several months. Hepatitis A does not cause chronic liver disease. However, in rare cases, it can cause acute liver failure, which may be fatal.

Hepatitis A is common in areas where there is poor sanitation. The infection can easily be spread to others by drinking water or eating food that has been contaminated by the feces (poop) of an infected person. Hepatitis A can also pass from person to person through direct contact, such as when living with or caring for someone who is infected, or through sexual contact or blood exposure, such as sharing needles or other equipment used to prepare or inject drugs.

Infected people can spread the disease to others two weeks before symptoms develop, and generally up to one week after jaundice or other symptoms develop. Those without symptoms can also spread the disease to others while they are infected.

Proper hand washing with soap and water after using the bathroom and handling diapers, and before eating and preparing food is very important to prevent the spread of hepatitis A. A vaccine is also available to prevent the disease.

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

The hepatitis A vaccine is approved by Health Canada. It protects against hepatitis that is caused by the hepatitis A virus. The hepatitis A vaccine does not protect against other types of hepatitis viruses, such as hepatitis B and hepatitis C. This vaccine is given by needle. The vaccine does not contain any live virus so it cannot cause hepatitis A disease.

Who should get the hepatitis A vaccine?

Immunization is the best way to protect against hepatitis A. When you are immunized, you also help protect others because someone who is immunized is less likely to spread the virus. It is especially important for people 6 months of age and older to get immunized against hepatitis A if they are:

- in close contact with an infected person;
- living with certain high-risk medical conditions (e.g. chronic renal disease, liver disease including hepatitis C and chronic hepatitis B carriers, HIV and immunosuppression);
- going to an area or country where hepatitis A is common (*Note: Manitoba Health does not cover the costs for hepatitis A vaccines related to international travel*);
- people experiencing homelessness;
- people using drugs in ways that involve smoking, snorting or injecting, or who share equipment used for these activities (excludes drugs that are used as prescribed for therapeutic indications);
- gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM).

Talk to your health-care provider to see if you are eligible to receive the hepatitis A vaccine free-of-charge.

For the most up-to-date vaccine eligibility, please visit: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/vaccineeligibility.html.

Who should NOT get the hepatitis A vaccine?

Talk to your health care provider if you or your child(ren):

- have had a severe allergic reaction after receiving a previous dose of a hepatitis A vaccine; or
- is/are allergic to any contents of the vaccine.

Anyone with high fever should postpone immunization until recovered. The vaccine can still be given if the illness is mild, like a cold.

What are the possible side-effects of the hepatitis A vaccine?

Health Canada approves vaccines based on a review of quality and safety. It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get hepatitis A disease. Common reactions to the vaccine include soreness, redness or swelling where the vaccine was given. Some children may have fever, drowsiness, fussiness, loss of appetite or an upset stomach. These are mild reactions and usually only last one to two days. Acetaminophen (ex: Tylenol®) can be given for fever or soreness.

Acetylsalicylic acid-ASA (ex: Aspirin)® should NEVER be given to children because it can cause a severe liver and brain disease called Reye's Syndrome.

A severe allergic reaction is a serious but very rare side-effect of getting the vaccine. Symptoms could include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat and face. It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine so you or your child(ren) can be monitored. If symptoms occur after leaving the clinic, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department for immediate attention.

Report any serious or unexpected side-effects to a health care provider.

Your record of protection

All immunizations are recorded in a person's immunization record in Manitoba's Immunization Registry.

This registry enables:

- your health care provider to find out which immunizations you or your child(ren) have received
- the production of immunization records or notification to you about overdue vaccines
- public health officials to monitor how well vaccines work in preventing disease

For information on how to obtain a copy of your immunization record, visit: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/div/records.html

The Personal Health Information Act protects your information and/or that of your child(ren). You can have your personal health information and/or that of your child(ren) hidden from view from health care providers. For more information, please refer to: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/surveillance/phims.html.

For the most current version of this or other vaccine factsheets and resources visit: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/div/vaccines.html.

For more information on hepatitis A disease and vaccines, you can:

- talk to your health care provider
- call Health Links–Info Santé in Winnipeg at 204-788-8200; toll free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257
- visit Manitoba's Public health website on hepatitis A at: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/diseases/hepatitisa.html
- visit Manitoba's Immunization Program website at: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/div/index.html