

HEPATITIS A & B VACCINATION



What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by the Hepatitis A virus. It can be spread in the faeces of an infected person. The virus can spread through contaminated water or food, usually through poor hand washing.

It can also be spread through some sexual practices, such as oral-anal sex (rimming), digital-anal sex and sharing sex toys.

Hepatitis A is uncommon in the UK, but some people can be at increased risk. This includes travellers to parts of the world with poor levels of sanitation, men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs.

How can Hepatitis A affect me?

Hepatitis A can be unpleasant, but it's not usually serious and most people make a full recovery within a couple of months. Symptoms usually develop around four weeks after becoming infected, although not everyone will experience them.

Symptoms can include fever, feeling tired and generally unwell, joint and muscle pains, loss of appetite, stomach pain, jaundice, itchy skin, dark urine and pale faeces.

Some people, particularly young children, may not have any symptoms and may not recognise they have become infected.

With Hepatitis A there are usually no long term problems, however it can occasionally last for many months and, in rare cases, it can be life-threatening if it causes the liver to stop working properly (liver failure).

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis B virus which is found in the blood and body fluids of someone with Hepatitis B infection. Hepatitis B infection is more common in certain countries.

It can be spread by:

- Having unprotected anal, vaginal or oral sex or using sex toys
- Injecting drugs and sharing needles and other drug equipment, such as spoons and filters. It can also be transmitted by sharing equipment to snort drugs
- Vertical transmission from mother to baby
- Within families in countries where the infection is common
- Having a tattoo, piercing or medical or dental treatment with unsterilised equipment
- A needlestick injury
- Sharing toothbrushes or razors contaminated with infected blood

How can Hepatitis B affect me?

Many people have mild or no symptoms and don't recognise that they have become infected. Symptoms can include fever, feeling tired and generally unwell, joint and muscle pains, loss of appetite, stomach pain, jaundice, itchy skin, dark urine and pale faeces. In rare cases, it can be life-threatening if it causes the liver to stop working properly (liver failure).

The vast majority of people infected with Hepatitis B in adulthood are able to fight off the virus and fully recover within one to three months. Most will then be immune to the infection for life.

Babies and children with Hepatitis B are more likely to develop a chronic infection (long-lasting).

People who also have Hepatitis C or HIV are at greater risk of chronic infection and becoming carriers.

Those with chronic infection may have no symptoms for years but the liver is slowly being damaged. Although treatment can help, there's a risk that people with chronic Hepatitis B could eventually develop serious problems such as scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) or liver cancer.

If you have chronic infection you can pass the virus on to others.

Should I be tested for Hepatitis B?

Because it is possible to have chronic infection with Hepatitis B without having any symptoms, testing is recommended if you have ever been at risk. Testing is done by a blood test.

How can I protect myself against Hepatitis A and B?

Safer Sex

As Hepatitis A and B can be passed on during sex, practicing safer sex (using a condom for oral, vaginal and anal sex and a dam when licking/sucking the genitals or anus) will reduce your chances of becoming infected. It will also reduce your chances of other sexually transmitted infections. Condoms and dams are available free of charge from all sexual health services and many other places – just ask your local sexual health clinic.

Vaccination

The good news is that there are vaccines that can give most people protection against the Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B viruses. Your GP or sexual health clinic can advise you how best to get vaccinated. The vaccines are given at the top of the arm. Usually you will require 3 or 4 vaccines over a period of time. It is advisable to have a booster vaccination for Hepatitis B after 5 years.

Is the vaccine safe?

Hepatitis A and B vaccines have been available for many years and have a very good safety record. Like many other vaccinations there can be mild soreness and redness around the site of the injection. Much less common are flu-like symptoms. Serious side effects including allergic reactions are very unusual.

How will I know that the vaccination has worked?

Most people will respond well to the vaccine and a routine check is not always performed. Some clinics will however check that you have responded adequately to the Hepatitis B vaccine. This is done by a blood test.

I have not been vaccinated but I am worried that I have recently had sexual exposure to someone who may have hepatitis. Is there something I can do now?

It is important you speak to your GP or healthcare staff at a Sexual Health Clinic or Emergency Department as soon as possible. A vaccination course for Hepatitis B can offer some protection if given up to six weeks after an exposure. It is important not to leave it any longer than necessary since the sooner vaccination is given the better. Ideally it should be started within 48 hours. In some cases where the risk of Hepatitis B transmission is very high, additional medication called immunoglobulin may also be given.