

Key aspects briefly summarized

- Hepatitis A is a liver infection caused by a virus.
- The virus is easily transmitted by contaminated food or water but can also be transmitted through sexual contact.
- A safe and very effective vaccine is available that affords long-lasting protection.
- Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for all travelers going to tropical or subtropical countries, and for risk groups.

Disease

Hepatitis A is caused by a highly contagious virus that affects the liver. It is also known as infectious jaundice. Hepatitis A is very common in unvaccinated travelers.

Occurrence / Risk areas

Hepatitis A occurs all over the world, but the risk of infection is higher in countries with poor hygiene standards. There is an increased risk in most tropical and subtropical countries, as well as in some countries in Eastern Europe and around the Mediterranean.

In recent years, there have also been increasing cases in North America and Europe, including Switzerland, especially among men who have sex with men (MSM). Outbreaks in northern European countries can also occur when unvaccinated children become infected during family visits to tropical and subtropical countries. Upon return, they may transmit the virus within their care facilities.

Transmission

Transmission occurs mainly through drinking water or food contaminated by faeces. Other transmission routes are close personal contacts, especially sexual contacts (anal-oral sex) or insufficient hand hygiene.

Symptoms

Several weeks after the infection symptoms such as fever, fatigue, nausea, lack of appetite, abdominal discomfort and diarrhea may occur. Within a few days yellow skin and eyes (jaundice) may follow. Most symptoms disappear after a few weeks, but fatigue can often last for months. Young children usually have few or no symptoms, but in older people, the disease can be severe and prolonged.

Treatment

No specific treatment is available. Recovery from an acute hepatitis A infection can take several weeks or months and requires physical rest and diet.

Prevention

There is a safe and very effective vaccine that consists of two injections at least 6 months apart. It provides lifelong protection after the second dose. Hepatitis A vaccination can also be given in combination with hepatitis B vaccination (3 doses required).

Vaccination against hepatitis A is recommended for all travellers to risk areas, as well as for persons at increased personal risk: persons with chronic liver disease, men who have sex with men, people who use or inject drug, persons with increased occupational contact with persons from high-risk areas or populations, and others.

Further Information

- Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH). Hepatitis A.
<https://www.bag.admin.ch/bag/en/home/krankheiten/krankheiten-im-ueberblick/hepatitis-a.html>
- Swiss Hepatitis: <https://en.hepatitis-schweiz.ch/all-about-hepatitis/hepatitis-a>