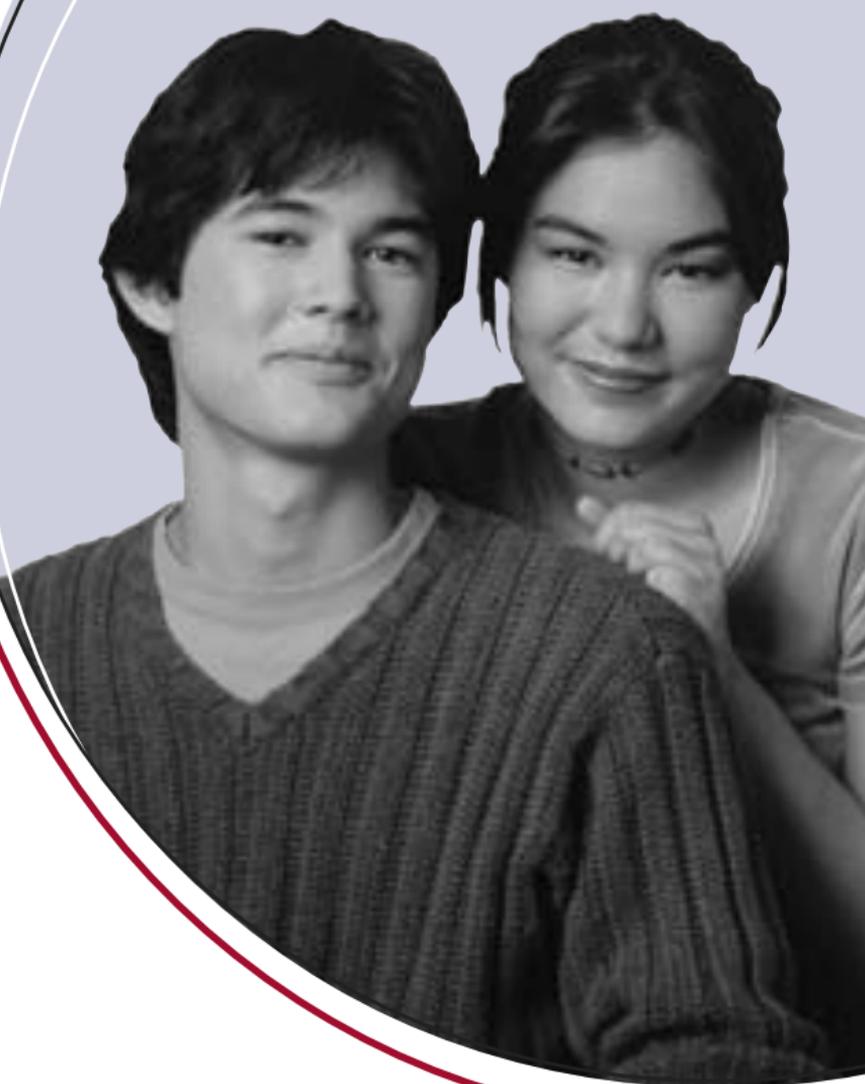


# Hepatitis A



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Fighting liver disease

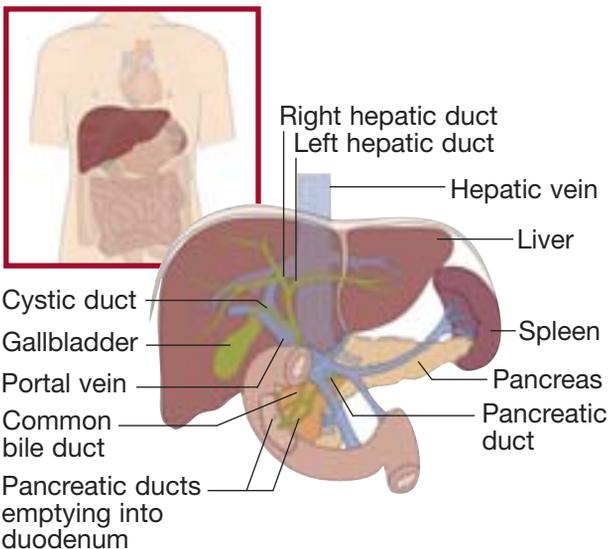
# Hepatitis A

## The liver

Your liver is your body's 'factory', carrying out hundreds of jobs that are vital for life. You only have one liver, but it is very tough. It keeps on going when badly damaged and can repair itself.

Your liver has about 500 different roles. Importantly, it:

- makes quick energy when the body needs it
- helps fight infections
- makes bile to help breakdown food in the gut
- stores sugars, vitamins and minerals, including iron
- destroys and deals with poisons and drugs
- filters and cleans the blood
- controls the amount of cholesterol
- makes and controls the amount of hormones
- makes the chemicals – proteins and enzymes – that keep our body working.



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## What does hepatitis mean?

Hepatitis means your liver becomes inflamed (swollen and tender). The most common cause is being infected with a virus.

An inflamed liver can also be caused by:

- drinking too much alcohol
- the side effects of some medicines and chemicals
- a liver disease called autoimmune hepatitis where the body's immune system doesn't work properly and attacks the liver.

## How many hepatitis viruses are there?

There are several different hepatitis viruses which affect the liver - the main ones are hepatitis A, B, C, D and E. **(For information on hepatitis B, C, D and E, visit our website at [www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk) or write enclosing a SAE (our address is on the back cover).**

The viruses are different from each other in:

- how they are passed from person to person
- the way they cause liver damage
- the effects they can have on health.

Hepatitis A, sometimes called hep A or HAV, is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. You can prevent illness by having a vaccination that will protect you from being infected for up to 10 years.

## Where is hepatitis A common?

Hepatitis A is common in places where water supplies and sewage disposal are of a poor standard, and where personal and food hygiene standards are poor.

Southern and Eastern Europe, Africa and parts of the Middle and Far East are high-risk areas.

## How is hepatitis A passed on?

Hepatitis A is passed from person to person by eating food or drinking water contaminated (infected) with the virus. The illness can spread easily within families and where people live closely together.

The virus is passed out in the bowel motions of an infected person, which is why it is important to wash your hands after going to the toilet. Drinking water can be contaminated with the virus.

Fruit, vegetables and uncooked food washed in contaminated water can cause infection, especially in hot countries. Shellfish can be infected if it comes from sea contaminated with sewage. Cooked food is safe, but can be contaminated if it has been handled by someone with the virus.

Infection is not very common in the UK. But the true number of people affected is unknown as people who only have mild symptoms may not go to a doctor.

## What are the symptoms?

After the virus enters the body, there are no symptoms for two to six weeks (the incubation period). Some people, particularly young children, may only have a mild illness. They may not know they are infected, although they can pass on the virus to others.

A few people (especially older) develop a serious illness and need to be looked after in hospital.

However, there may be general symptoms - often mistakenly diagnosed as flu - such as tiredness, aches and pains, a fever and/or a loss of appetite. There may also be nausea (feeling sick), sickness, stomach ache and/or diarrhoea. These symptoms may last for a week or more. Then jaundice may develop. Jaundice is easily noticeable because the whites of the eyes go yellow, and in more serious cases the skin goes yellow, urine may turn dark and bowel motions become pale.

Jaundice is caused by too much of a yellow substance called bilirubin building up in the body. Bilirubin is a waste product from the breakdown of red blood cells which the liver normally gets rid of by passing it out in your bowel motions. When the liver is not working properly, bilirubin builds up in the body.

It will take a while to recover from hepatitis A. Most people feel better within a few weeks, although they may feel tired and lack energy for many more months. Once you have recovered, you will never be infected with hepatitis A again. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, the illness does not cause long-term liver damage.

The illness may last longer and be more severe in a few people. The illness tends to be more serious in older people and, on rare occasions, it can cause liver damage that could kill. For a few people who develop severe hepatitis A, a liver transplant can save their life.

## Treatment

As with most illnesses caused by viruses, there is no specific treatment. People with jaundice may develop very bad itching, which may require treatment.

Many people feel tired and need more rest than usual. Generally, people are encouraged to eat and drink as well as they are able.

Light food may be easier to digest, but there is no reason to stop eating fat unless it causes discomfort. It is best to avoid alcohol and a lot of exercise.

## Protect yourself with a vaccination

If you are going to visit countries where hepatitis A is common, we recommend that you have a vaccination. You will receive one injection 4 to 6 weeks before you travel and a booster 6 to 12 months later. Your doctor will be able to give you advice about vaccinations.

If you have been in close contact with an infected person or are travelling at late notice, short-term protection, lasting 3 to 6 months is available; this is an injection of antibodies called immunoglobulin. We recommend you get vaccinated if you:

- are visiting countries where hepatitis A is common
- are an injecting drug user
- are a gay man (or your sexual behaviour may put you at risk)
- are at risk through your work (for example, if you come into contact with sewage)
- already have long-term liver disease (infection with hepatitis A in someone who already has liver disease can cause a more serious illness).

Not everyone needs to be vaccinated. Some people have antibodies from a previous infection that they may not have known they had. Your doctor can check this with a blood test.

## Avoid infection with hepatitis A by:

- visiting your doctor or travel clinic for a vaccination 4 to 6 weeks before you travel to a high-risk area
- avoiding having ice cubes in drinks, drinking tap water, eating ice cream or cleaning your teeth in tap water in countries where hepatitis A is common
- not eating poorly-cooked shellfish, uncooked vegetables, salads, unpeeled fruit or unpasteurised milk in high-risk countries.

If you are worried that you may have hepatitis A, you must contact your doctor.

## Support the British Liver Trust

We raise funds from many sources and a large proportion is donated by voluntary contributions. For the British Liver Trust to continue its support, information and research programme, we need your help. If you can send a donation, it will enable us to keep providing the services that people need.

If you would like to help, please fill in the form on the page opposite.

If you wish to help us further with our work by participating in a fundraising event or becoming a **“Friend of the British Liver Trust”** please contact:

### British Liver Trust

Portman House, 44 High Street,  
Ringwood, BH24 1AG

**Tel: 01425 463080 Fax: 01425 470706**

**Email: [info@britishlivertrust.org.uk](mailto:info@britishlivertrust.org.uk)**



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\* You must pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax equal to the amount the British Liver Trust will reclaim on your donation: which is equal to 28p for every £1 you donate.

Your name and address will be added to our computer database ensuring you are sent the latest information. If you do not wish to receive further information, please tick here.

This leaflet is for information only. Professional, medical or other advice should be obtained before acting on anything contained in the leaflet as no responsibility can be accepted by the British Liver Trust as a result of action taken or not taken because of the contents.

**British Liver Trust**

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