

Medicine for Managers

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Hepatitis A

Viral hepatitis is a group of potentially serious infections involving the liver. There are five recognised strains, hepatitis A, B, C, D and E. All cause inflammation and swelling of the liver but they differ in their methods of acquisition, their presentations and their outcomes. It can be acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term). This week, we shall look at hepatitis A (and E).

Hepatitis A, formerly known as infectious hepatitis, is an acute infection which causes inflammation and swelling of the liver.

It is most commonly found in the developing countries, such as Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, where poverty and poor levels of sanitation are important factors. In these countries almost every adult has antibodies to hepatitis A, which suggests that the infection is endemic with every individual exposed to the infection and developing immunity probably in childhood.

Everyone should wash their hands after using the toilet

Hepatitis A, which is caused by the Hepatitis A virus, is spread as a result of poor hygiene, often in situations where people do not wash their hands properly after going to the toilet. The most common causes are contaminated food or person-to-person contact.

The virus is often found in drinking water where sanitation is poor and sewage is able to contaminate clean water supplies. In such circumstances major outbreaks of hepatitis A can occur.

Cooking may destroy the virus and so the foods most likely to be responsible for viral transmission are raw vegetables, fruit and salads washed in contaminated water or where such water is used to make ice cubes, cold drinks and ice cream.

Shellfish may be the cause of transmission of the infection if they come from contaminated sea water.

Although hepatitis A can be acquired by intravenous drug users sharing needles, it is unusual and they are more at risk of other forms of hepatitis.

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The incubation period for hepatitis A is two to six weeks. The extent of the symptoms varies from very mild to severe and the illness is less likely to be serious and debilitating in the young than in the elderly.

Most people contracting the illness are children or young adults. The symptoms include weakness, tiredness and lassitude, headache, fever, nausea, sickness and diarrhoea, the passage of pale stools, abdominal pain, dehydration and skin itching.

The key to avoiding the illness is effective prevention and paramount is maintaining good personal hygiene

Seven to ten days after the onset of the symptoms jaundice appears. Jaundice occurs because the infected liver is unable to manage bilirubin.

Bilirubin is produced by the liver by the breakdown of red blood cells and in particular the haemoglobin molecule. It is joined with protein to make it water soluble.

This allows it to drain from the liver in the bile into the upper part of the bowel.

If the process cannot occur the pigment builds up and overflows into the blood causing the skin and the whites of the eyes to become yellow.

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A.

However most people recover from the disease in a few weeks. About one in five of patients infected with the virus need admission to hospital for supportive treatment including intravenous fluids and nutritional support.

Some patients experience a relapsing illness which may last six to twelve months. A small number of people, usually aged over sixty, die from overwhelming infection.

Following resolution of the infection the patient should avoid alcohol for at least six months whilst the liver completely recovers because alcohol is toxic to liver cells.

Hepatitis A is a notifiable condition. Registered medical practitioners have a statutory duty to notify the appropriate officer at the local council or local health protection team.

The key to avoiding the illness is effective prevention and paramount is maintaining good personal hygiene practices.

Everyone should wash their hands after using the toilet and high standards should be applied with all food preparation.

Vigilance in areas of high risk is essential, especially in respect of the food consumed.

All uncooked food, including salads, raw vegetables, shellfish and un-bottled water should be avoided.

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There is available a vaccine against hepatitis A which can be obtained from the GP or from travel clinics.

Anyone visiting a high risk area should receive a vaccination, which is available to prevent the disease. It is available for children aged 12-18 (2 doses) and for adults can be combined with a hepatitis B vaccine.

Hepatitis E is a waterborne disease caused by the Heatitis E virus. It too arises in those areas where there is poor sanitation resulting in the contamination of drinking water with faecal matter.

It is principally a disease of the Middle East, Central America, Africa and parts of Asia.

The illness is usually acute and produces a picture similar to that of hepatitis A.

As with hepatitis A there is no specific treatment and the advice of resting, drinking plenty of fluids, eating well and avoiding alcohol is similar.

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