Hepatitis E
Community and Public Health

Phone: 03 364 1777  Fax: 03 379 6484  Web: www.cph.co.nz

Hepatitis E is a liver disease caused by a virus. It is found in many countries especially India, Asia, Africa and Central America but not in New Zealand. There are an estimated 20 million hepatitis E infections worldwide every year.

What are the symptoms?
The signs and symptoms of hepatitis E are similar to other forms of hepatitis, especially in persons aged 15 to 40 years. These include:
- jaundice;
- dark urine;
- pale faeces/poo;
- loss of appetite;
- abdominal pain and tenderness;
- nausea and vomiting;
- fever.

Although infection is frequent in children, the disease is mostly asymptomatic or causes a very mild illness without jaundice and is usually not diagnosed.

It takes 2 to 10 weeks to develop the illness after exposure, and usually lasts 2 to 6 weeks. Occasionaly it can result in acute liver failure, that can lead to death. Pregnant women are at greater risk of complications and death from hepatitis E, with a fatality rate of 20% in the third trimester.

How is it caught or spread?
The hepatitis E virus (HEV) is transmitted mainly through drinking water contaminated with faeces/poo. Other transmission routes have been identified, including:
- foodborne transmission (from infected animals);
- transfusion of infected blood products;
- vertical transmission from a pregnant woman to her foetus;
- eating raw or uncooked shellfish;
- sexual contact (uncommon cause).

How is it diagnosed?
Diagnosis of hepatitis E infection is made by a blood test that detects antibodies. This test is only done if tests for other types of hepatitis are negative.

How is the spread prevented?
Wash your hands thoroughly by using plenty of soap, cleaning under fingernails, rinsing hands well and drying thoroughly:
- after going to the toilet or changing nappies;
- before eating;
- before and after preparing food;
- before washing and serving fruits, berries, salads and vegetables.

Bed-linen, underpants, towels and handkerchiefs used during the illness should be washed in hot water.

How is it treated?
Any treatment is supportive only, particularly drinking plenty of fluids.

How can it be prevented?
The risk of infection and transmission can be reduced by:
- good public water supplies;
- proper sewerage systems;
- maintaining hygienic practices such as hand washing with safe water, particularly before handling food;
- avoiding drinking water and/or ice of unknown purity;
- avoiding eating uncooked shellfish, and uncooked fruits or vegetables that are not peeled or that are prepared by people living in or travelling in highly endemic countries.

Time away from work or school
Someone who has hepatitis E may only return to preschool, school or work after he/she is no longer infectious and when cleared by the local Public Health Unit.

Talk to your doctor if you are concerned about hepatitis E. Your doctor is required to report hepatitis E to the local Public Health Unit. They may contact you to find out how you got the illness (to prevent others from being infected) and to arrange for follow-up.

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For other information about your health and medication, go to: www.healthinfo.org.nz