



# Hepatitis A virus (HAV)

## What is it?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and can have many causes, the most common of which is an infection with a hepatitis virus.

## Where is it found?

- HAV is found in the faeces of infected persons and is primarily spread via the faecal-oral route.
- HAV can contaminate foods prepared by an infected person or washed with contaminated water.
- HAV can also be found in shellfish harvested from sewage-contaminated waters.

## Why is it a problem?

- Persons with hepatitis A may show symptoms of fever, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, abdominal pain and jaundice.
- The disease is usually mild and recovery is usually complete within one or two weeks, although, occasionally the symptoms are severe and recovery can take several months.
- The incubation period for hepatitis A varies from 10 to 50 days, which means that infected persons can spread the disease before they realise they have it.
- Death due to liver failure may occur but is rare.

## Who is at risk?

- All groups are susceptible to illness upon ingestion of the virus although disease is more common in adults compared to children.
- Fatality rates increase with age hence the risk of more serious illness is higher for older age groups.
- People most likely to contract hepatitis A include people who live with a hepatitis A patient, children who attend day-care, people who work in a day-care centre, men who have sex with men and people who travel to countries where hepatitis A is common (e.g. Africa and Asia).

## How can the risk be reduced?

- Vaccines are available which provide long-term protection against infection. Individuals who have been infected will also have a lifelong protection against reinfection.
- Other preventative measures include good hygiene and proper hand washing of food handlers, day-care workers etc.
- Infected food handlers should be excluded from food preparation processes, although this is difficult to control due to the risk of virus transmission during the incubation period.
- Shellfish should be bought from reputable food stores/restaurants and should be cooked properly to minimise the risk of infection.