

Hepatitis E

Public health information sheet

Hepatitis E is a virus that damages your liver. Some people have no symptoms or only a very mild illness, but it can be very serious for pregnant women, those who are immunocompromised and those with other liver conditions.

People who get hepatitis E virus (HEV) in New Zealand are generally infected while travelling overseas. The virus is more common in India and regions of Asia, Africa and Central America.

How it spreads

People most commonly become infected when they eat food or drink water contaminated by the infected poo of a person or animal with HEV.

Common causes of infection when overseas include:

- drinking contaminated water in places with poor sewage systems
- eating raw or undercooked shellfish
- eating raw fruit and vegetables
- eating infected animal meat (especially pork meat and livers, venison and wild boar).

HEV can also be passed on:

- by pregnant women during childbirth
- through blood transfusions in countries that do not have adequate controls in place to prevent viruses being passed on
- through sexual contact, specifically anal and oral sex (although this is less common).

Symptoms

Some people with HEV have no symptoms or only have a very mild illness.

For those who do become unwell signs and symptoms can include:

- yellow skin or eyes (jaundice)
- dark urine
- pale poo (faeces)
- loss of appetite
- tummy pain
- feeling and being sick
- fever
- stomach pains.

It usually takes between two and 10 weeks to become unwell after being infected. The illness usually lasts two to six weeks. Most people get better by themselves and do not need any medical treatment.

If you have symptoms

Contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.

Your doctor may request a blood sample for testing if they think you have hepatitis.

There are other types of hepatitis which are more common than HEV, so your blood will be tested for these other types first.

Restrictions

If you have HEV you are at risk of passing it on to others.

You will need to stay home from work, school or day care. It will be safe to return 14 days after you first developed symptoms.

People you live with or have had close contact with should watch out for symptoms for up to nine weeks after you have recovered. If they develop symptoms they should seek advice from their doctor, or call Healthline on 0800 611 116.

You can pass on HEV to others for up to two weeks after your symptoms first start. To protect others you need to take precautions.

Practise good handwashing habits

Wash hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- before and after changing babies nappies or holding a baby

Food and drink

- avoid preparing food for others where possible
- avoid sharing food, drinks, spoons and straws.

Other precautions

- wash bed-linen, underwear, towels and handkerchiefs in hot water during your illness
- be careful around pregnant women, babies and small children
- ensure your bodily fluids (e.g. blood or semen) do not come into contact with others
- avoid using public swimming pools.
- if you or a child are unwell then do not share bathwater.

Travel advice

People travelling to countries where HEV is common should:

- avoid unsafe drinking water, including ice and drinks mixed with water
- only drink bottled and boiled water
- avoid food from street stalls, uncooked shellfish, and raw fruit and vegetables
- ensure hot food is well cooked, and eaten while still hot
- thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water, and dry them properly

Unfortunately there is no vaccine available to protect against hepatitis E.

For more advice on staying safe when traveling abroad visit www.safetravel.govt.nz.

For more information

For more information visit:

- www.arphs.nz/HEV

For health advice call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.