

HEPATITIS A IN THE WORKPLACE

This information sheet is designed to provide employers and employees with information about hepatitis A in the workplace.

Sources of additional information and advice are listed at the end of this pamphlet.

Sheet 30 in this series provides information about hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV.

WHAT IS HEPATITIS A?

Hepatitis A is an infectious disease, caused by the hepatitis A virus, which affects the liver.

Symptoms may include stomach pain, nausea, fever and tiredness. Severity of symptoms is related to age, with children often showing no symptoms.

People usually recover within a few weeks but sometimes symptoms may persist for several months. After recovery a person cannot be infected a second time. Hepatitis A infection does not lead to chronic (long term) liver disease.

HOW IS HEPATITIS A SPREAD?

The hepatitis A virus multiplies in the intestinal tract of infected people and is excreted in their faeces. The infection spreads when the virus is taken in by mouth into the digestive tract of another person. This most commonly occurs as a result of faecal contamination of hands, food or other objects.

In areas where water supply and sewage disposal are substandard, drinking water can be contaminated with the hepatitis A virus. Food washed in contaminated water, and then eaten uncooked, can also spread the virus. Shellfish can be infected by sewage-contaminated water.

WHAT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS ARE AT RISK OF HEPATITIS A INFECTION?

Employees at risk of hepatitis A infection can include:

- staff caring for infants and young children (eg in child care centres)
- staff travelling to high risk areas (eg Asia, Pacific Islands, Africa, Central and South America)
- staff working in remote communities with poor sanitation
- health care workers in paediatric, infectious disease, emergency and intensive care wards
- food handlers
- sewage workers.

This list of occupations is not complete. A risk assessment should be done for each workplace.

WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS' RESPONSIBILITIES?

Under Section 19 of the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare (OHSW) Act 1986 (SA) and Division 1.3 of the Occupational Health, Safety & Welfare (OHSW) Regulations 1995 (SA), employers have a duty of care to protect the health and safety of their employees. This requires them to identify any hazards that could harm their employees, assess the risks associated with these hazards, and work out ways of eliminating or minimising these risks through appropriate control measures. This must be done in consultation with employees and their representatives.

Occupational control measures for hepatitis A include:

- ensuring adequate standards of hygiene and sanitation*
- eliminating or redesigning work practices and equipment which expose employees to the hepatitis A virus
- developing written procedures for safe work practices
- providing education, information and training for employees
- providing vaccinations or post-exposure immunoglobulin for staff at risk.

Further information about control measures can be obtained from the sources listed at the end of this pamphlet.

WHAT ARE EMPLOYEES' RESPONSIBILITIES?

Under Section 21 of the OHSW Act, employees have a duty of care to protect their own health and safety at work and to avoid adversely affecting the health and safety of any other person.

Employees can minimise the risk of hepatitis A infection to themselves and others by:

- following documented safe work practices, including appropriate personal hygiene and infection control measures (eg handwashing)
- getting vaccinated when appropriate
- reporting any hazards to their employer.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT AN EMPLOYEE'S HEPATITIS A STATUS?

Hepatitis A is a notifiable disease which must be reported to the Communicable Disease Control Branch of the Department of Health by a treating medical practitioner.

Department of Health guidelines recommend that a treating medical practitioner exclude an employee from work for at least seven days following diagnosis of infection.

The Communicable Disease Control Branch will assess whether intervention in the workplace, in order to protect co-workers, clients or the public, is required.

Employees do not have to disclose the nature of their infection to their employer unless they are working in occupations where they could potentially infect others.

Division 6.3 of the OHSW Regulations 1995 - Confidentiality of Health Records requires an employer to take reasonable steps to ensure that those who provide occupational health services to that employer do not divulge personal information regarding the health of an employee (eg hepatitis A status) to any other person (including the employer).

WHERE IS THERE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HEPATITIS A?

Information and advice can be obtained from:

- Hepatitis Helpline
Freecall 1800 621 780
- *The childcare worker: Hepatitis A and other infectious diseases*, The Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board (Australia)
<http://www.whs.qld.gov.au/guide/gde64.pdf>
- This information sheet is available in Greek, Italian and Vietnamese translations on the WorkCover website: www.workcover.com and on audio tape in English, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese available for loan from WorkCover's library.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVICE

WorkCover Corporation

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General enquiries: 13 18 55
Fax: (08) 8233 2211

TTY calls: (08) 8233 2574
(for people who have hearing or speech impairments).

Non-English speaking: (08) 8226 1990
for information in languages other than English, call the Interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call WorkCover. This service is available at no cost to you.

If you would like this information in an alternative format (braille, audio or e-text) or community language please ring WorkCover on 13 18 55 and we will endeavour to meet your request.

www.workcover.com

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Port Pirie

Tel: (08) 8638 4777
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Tel: (08) 8648 8151
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* General requirements for hygiene and sanitation which apply to all workplaces are in the OHSW Regulations Division 2.2 Amenities and Division 2.18 Workplace Cleanliness and Hygiene.