

What is hepatitis E?

Hepatitis E is an illness of the liver caused by the hepatitis E virus (HEV), a virus which can infect both animals and humans. HEV infection usually produces a mild disease. However, disease symptoms can vary from no apparent symptoms to liver failure. Among pregnant women there is a risk of the virus causing severe illness which can, in rare cases, be fatal.

This is more likely to occur with the strains that are found in Asia and Africa and does not appear to be a feature of the strains that are commonly found in the UK.

Normally the virus infection will clear by itself. However, it has been shown that in individuals whose immune system is suppressed (e.g. HIV-infection, chemotherapy or in transplant patients) the virus can result in a persistent infection which may lead to chronic inflammation of the liver.

How can I tell if I have hepatitis E?

Among those who develop symptoms, the symptoms of hepatitis E can include yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), darkening of the urine and pale stools. Sometimes symptoms will include tiredness, fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and loss of appetite.

The illness usually resolves within one to four weeks.

Hepatitis E is detected by a blood test that looks for antibodies produced by your body's immune system to fight the virus and/or a blood test to look for the virus.

How long can I have the infection before developing symptoms?

The average incubation period for hepatitis E is 40 days (range 15-60 days), however not everyone will develop symptoms.

How common is hepatitis E?

Hepatitis E occurs in all parts of the world especially where sanitation may be poor including Asia, Africa and Central America. However, we now know that HEV infection can also be acquired in this country. The numbers of confirmed hepatitis E cases in the UK have increased significantly over the past few years.

How is hepatitis E virus transmitted?

In the developing world, the virus is transmitted by the consumption of food or water contaminated with human sewage. In the developed world, including the UK, the virus is believed to be transmitted from animals to humans through the consumption of undercooked or raw pig and game meat, processed pork and shellfish.

Hepatitis E does not spread easily from person to person, however someone with hepatitis E infection should always wash their hands thoroughly after using the toilet and before handling or preparing food.

During the first 2 weeks of hepatitis E illness:

- Avoid preparing food for others, if possible
- Limit close contact with others if possible, especially pregnant women, or people with chronic liver disease

Food handlers and healthcare workers should seek advice from their local health protection team or GP before returning to work.

Household members or other close contacts should:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water and then dry properly after contact with an infected person
- Wash hands after going to the toilet, before preparing, serving and eating food

Can Hepatitis E be passed on via blood transfusion?

Person to person transmission of the virus is very rare though the virus has been transmitted through blood transfusion and transplantation. If you have donated blood in the 6 months before you became ill please let the blood transfusion service know by ringing the SNBTS donor enquiry line on 0345 30 17 2 70 (Mon-Fri, 9-5).

How is hepatitis E treated?

There is normally no need for any treatment. However in patients with chronic infection antiviral treatment has been used successfully. Pregnant women should seek advice from their antenatal carer.

Alcohol

Alcohol is processed by your liver and, while infected we advise avoiding alcohol during the course of your illness.

Can hepatitis E infection be prevented?

Currently, there is no licensed vaccine in the UK for hepatitis E.

To reduce the risk of becoming infected you should ensure that meat is handled and cooked safely before eating it. It's especially important to make sure that pork, burgers and sausages are cooked all the way through. You should also wash your hands after touching uncooked meat or meat products, and avoid cross contamination by keeping raw meat away from foods that are ready to eat. More information about safe handling of food is available on the Food Standards Scotland website at: <http://www.foodstandards.gov.scot>

When travelling to countries with poor sanitation, it is advisable to boil all drinking water, including water used for brushing teeth. Avoid the consumption of raw or undercooked meat and shellfish.

General travel advice is available at <http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/home.aspx>

Where can I get further help?

Further information and advice is available from:

- The British Liver Trust 0800 652 7330 or www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/liver-information/liver-conditions/hepatitis-e/
- PHE <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hepatitis-e>
- NHS24 <http://www.nhs24.com/>
- Your own GP