

Beware of food hygiene Prevent Hepatitis A and E

Hepatitis A and E

- “Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver cells. There are many causes of hepatitis of which viral infection is more commonly seen in Hong Kong. Other causes include alcohol, drugs, chemicals and genetic diseases.
- Hepatitis A and E are liver diseases caused by the Hepatitis A and E viruses. In general they are transmitted through feco-oral route. Food contaminated with the virus is the most common vehicle transmitting hepatitis. The Hepatitis A and E viruses can be transmitted by drinking contaminated water and eating contaminated food without proper cooking, especially pork and pig offal, bivalve shellfish like oysters, clams, scallops and mussels, etc.
- Hepatitis A may be caused by close personal contact with infected person. Person-to-person transmission of Hepatitis E appears to be less efficient than hepatitis A virus.

Epidemiology

- In Hong Kong, the current situation resembles that of many developed countries. In the last 20 years, Hong Kong has experienced a steady fall in the incidence of hepatitis A. Most people in Hong Kong below the age of 30 have never been exposed, and are therefore susceptible to the virus. This situation provides an opportunity for the virus to rapidly spread in the community.
- Notification from acute Hepatitis E infection has been increasing in recent years and become the most common viral hepatitis reported to Department of Health. In 2010, 118 cases were reported to Department of Health, as compared with 11 cases in 2000.

Clinical features and prognosis

- The hepatitis A virus has an incubation period of 2 to 6 weeks. Symptoms and signs include mild fever, fatigue, muscle pains, headache, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, upper abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, jaundice (yellowing of skin and the whites of eyes) and tea-colored urine.
- The younger the patient, the less severe are the symptoms. In fact most people who contracted hepatitis A in childhood do not even recall being sick.
- Patients with Hepatitis A usually recover by themselves and become immune to it for life. There is no chronic carrier state but in a few cases, may develop into liver failure that can lead to death.

- Hepatitis E is similar to Hepatitis A- chronic infection does not occur. The case mortality rate is generally low at less than 1%. It may reach 20% among pregnant women in the third trimester.

Prevention

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis E. The most effective ways to combat Hepatitis A and E are to maintain good personal, food and environmental hygiene

Personal hygiene

- Wash hands with soap before preparing or eating food and after going to the toilet

Food hygiene

- Drink only boiled water
- All food, especially seafood (e.g. shellfish), pork and pig offal should be carefully cleaned and thoroughly cooked. They should be cooked at boiling temperature for not less than 5 minutes before eating. (The hepatitis A virus is killed by heating to 85 degree Celsius for 1 minute).
- Handle and store raw and cooked food separately to prevent cross-contamination.

Environmental hygiene

- sewage has to be properly disposed
- store drinking water properly
- keep all the kitchen utensils clean

Immunization

Hepatitis A vaccine

- The hepatitis A vaccine is essentially an inactivated form of the virus. Being vaccinated against hepatitis A helps produce antibodies to the virus. A complete course of vaccination requires 2 injections, given 6 months to 18 months apart. The body takes 4 weeks to develop antibody against hepatitis A after the first vaccine injection. Hepatitis A vaccine is not licensed for children younger than one year of age.

At present, no vaccine is available for the prevention of hepatitis E.

Immune Globulin

- Travelers may consider Hepatitis A immune globulin injection if they travel to

endemic areas and need to depart at short notice. Injection of immune globulin confers temporary protection of 3 to 5 months. If frequent travel to endemic areas is anticipated, one should receive hepatitis A vaccination for long term protection.

- Hepatitis E Immune Globulin is not yet available.

Management

- Anyone who suspected to contract Hepatitis A or Hepatitis E should consult their family doctor for advice. Do not take over-the counter medicine.

Website: <http://www.hepatitis.gov.hk>

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