UK Health Security Agency

Increase in acute hepatitis (liver inflammation) cases in children

Information for parents

27 April 2022

Overview of the recent increase in hepatitis

Since January 2022 there has been an increase in the number of children with acute (sudden onset) hepatitis of unknown cause in the UK. Most of these children are aged under 10 years.

Hepatitis is a condition that causes inflammation of the liver and can be caused by infection with a virus. The viruses that normally cause hepatitis (hepatitis viruses A to E) have not been found in the children affected recently. Other possible causes of acute hepatitis, including some medications and toxins, are also being investigated however so far a link has not been found. The UK Health Security Agency is working with the NHS and public health colleagues across the UK to find the cause as soon as possible.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

Hepatitis symptoms include:

- yellowing of the white part of the eyes or skin (jaundice) http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/jaundice/
- dark urine
- pale, grey-coloured faeces (poo)
- itchy skin
- muscle and joint pain
- a high temperature
- feeling and being sick
- feeling unusually tired all the time
- loss of appetite
- tummy pain

You do not need to contact the NHS unless your child is very unwell (for example, has breathing difficulties or is not eating or drinking) or if they develop jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin). If your child is getting rapidly worse or you are worried, trust your instincts and contact your GP or call the NHS on 111.

Which children are at risk of acute hepatitis?

Almost all of the children with acute hepatitis have been aged under 10 years, with most aged between 3 and 5 years. Most of the children affected were previously healthy, and only a very small number are linked to another case of hepatitis. This means that even if there has been someone with hepatitis among your family or friends, or at your child's nursery or school, your child is still at low risk.

What is causing the increase in acute hepatitis in children?

The viruses that normally cause hepatitis (hepatitis viruses A- E) have not been found in the children affected by the recent increase in acute hepatitis, therefore public health teams are looking at all other possible causes.

One area being explored is whether the hepatitis cases are linked to an increase in infections caused by adenovirus, a common cause of childhood illness. Over the last two years children have been mixing less because of the COVID-19 pandemic and because of this the number of common infections seen in children was reduced. Now that children are mixing more we are seeing an increase in some infections, including adenovirus.

We are also investigating other possible causes such as another infection (including COVID-19) or something in the environment. Some of the children with acute hepatitis have recently had a COVID-19 infection, but there has been a high number of COVID-19 infections in this age group so this is not unexpected.

There is no link between these hepatitis cases and the COVID-19 vaccine. None of the current cases aged under 10 years old in the UK is known to have been vaccinated.

What do I need to do if my child is unwell with symptoms of a viral illness?

Viral infections, including adenovirus, are common in children and cause a range of mild illnesses including colds, vomiting and diarrhoea. Adenovirus or other infections don't normally cause hepatitis, but it can be a **very rare** complication of some types of viral infection.

If your child develops the common mild symptoms that could be due to a viral infection, such as symptoms of a cold, vomiting or diarrhoea, the chance of them developing hepatitis is **extremely low**. Most children will soon recover following rest and plenty of fluids.

You do not need to contact the NHS unless your child is very unwell (for example, has breathing difficulties or is not eating or drinking) or if they develop jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin). If your child is getting rapidly worse or you are worried, trust your instincts and contact your GP or call the NHS on 111.

Children who are unwell should be kept at home and not be sent to school or nursery. Children who have experienced symptoms of a gastrointestinal infection including vomiting and diarrhoea should not return to school or nursery until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

How do I prevent the spread of common childhood infections?

Childhood infections are commonly passed from person to person through close contact, coughing and sneezing or by touching contaminated surfaces.

The most effective way to reduce the spread of infections is to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene. Cover your nose and mouth when you cough and sneeze, wash your hands regularly. Supervise thorough handwashing in younger children and make sure they cover their nose and mouth when they cough or sneeze.

About the UK Health Security Agency

UKHSA is responsible for protecting every member of every community from the impact of infectious diseases, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents and other health threats. We provide intellectual, scientific and operational leadership at national and local level, as well as on the global stage, to make the nation heath secure.

UKHSA is an executive agency, sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care.

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