

Overview of the increase in hepatitis cases

Since January 2022, an increase in the number of acute (sudden onset) hepatitis cases has been detected in Ireland, the UK and other countries worldwide, mainly in children under 10 years of age.

Hepatitis is a condition that affects the liver and may occur for a number of reasons, including viral infections. In the current cases, the viruses that normally cause hepatitis (called hepatitis viruses A to E) have not been detected. To date, none of the common non-viral causes have been identified either. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) is working with the HSE and Public Health colleagues across Ireland and Europe to try and find the cause.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?*

Hepatitis symptoms include:

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

What is causing the increase in cases?

As the usual causes of infectious hepatitis have not been detected among the cases in Ireland or in other countries, public health teams are looking at all other possible causes. Some of the children have tested positive for adenoviruses, and therefore this is being considered.

What does adenovirus infection cause?

Adenoviruses are a group of very common viruses that cause a range of mild illnesses such as colds, vomiting and diarrhoea. Adenovirus infections are very common in young children, and while they don't usually cause hepatitis, it can be a rare complication of some types of adenovirus infection.

If your child develops the common mild symptoms that could be due to adenovirus infection, such as mild respiratory symptoms or diarrhoea, the chance of them developing hepatitis is extremely low. If your child develops signs of jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin) or pale/grey coloured faeces (poo), you should contact your GP doctor. Children who are unwell should be kept at home and not be sent to school or creche.

How do you catch adenovirus?

Like other common childhood infections, adenoviruses are commonly passed from person to person or by touching contaminated surfaces, as well as through coughing and sneezing.

The most effective way to reduce the spread of adenoviruses is to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene and to supervise thorough handwashing in younger children.

Could the cases be linked to COVID-19 infection or vaccine?

None of the cases identified so far in Ireland have had recent COVID-19 infection. It would not be surprising however to find some cases with recent COVID-19 infection, considering that there has been a lot of COVID-19 infection circulating in the community in recent months.

There is no link between these hepatitis cases and the COVID-19 vaccine. The COVID-19 vaccines do not contain organisms that grow in the human body.

Who is at risk of hepatitis?

Almost all of the cases have been seen in children under 10, with most cases aged between 2 and 5 years. Most of the children affected were previously healthy, and none of the cases identified in Ireland are linked to another case of hepatitis, although a very small number of cases in other countries are linked to another case. This means that even if there has been a case in your family or friends, or if a case has occurred at your child's creche or school, your child is still at low risk of developing hepatitis.

What can we do to prevent hepatitis?

As the cause of this illness is still unknown, the control measures cannot be clearly identified at this stage. However, in view of the possibility that a virus might be linked to this increase in cases, it is wise to adopt personal and environmental hygiene measures to prevent transmission of the most common respiratory or gastrointestinal infections. These include reinforcing general good hygienic practices (including careful hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfection of surfaces) in settings attended by young children.

If you think your child has hepatitis seek medical advice

Parents are advised to go to their GP if their child develops symptoms of hepatitis. Symptoms of hepatitis can include:

- pale, grey-coloured poo (stools)
- dark urine
- yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice)

If a child has any of these 3 symptoms, parents are advised to contact their GP without delay. The GP will assess the child and refer on for further assessment as indicated.

Other symptoms of hepatitis are outlined above*

For further advice on **child health conditions** please see HSE information at [Conditions and symptoms - HSE.ie](https://www.hse.ie/eng/conditionsand_symptoms)