



# WHAT IS HEPATITIS E?

## HEPATITIS E IS A LIVER INFECTION. THE VIRUS THAT CAUSES THE INFECTION IS PASSED ON THROUGH FAECAL MATTER (POO).

**T**his usually happens when faecal matter gets into water that someone eats or drinks. This can occur when either the water supply is not clean – such as getting water from a river or dam where someone may have defecated – or if water is collected in a container that is not clean.

The Ministry of Health and Social Services declared an outbreak of hepatitis E on 14 December 2017 in Windhoek. The outbreak has occurred primarily in the Havana and Goreangab informal settlements in Katutura, although cases also have been reported in other areas including Ombili and Greenwell Matongo.

According to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the symptoms of hepatitis E are:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the whites of the eyes)
- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Enlarged liver
- Dark urine
- Clay-coloured stool and/or diarrhoea
- Joint pain
- Body itching
- Rash

If you think you have symptoms of hepatitis E, you should see your doctor. Your doctor may order blood tests to confirm the infection.

For a healthy person, infection with hepatitis E usually gets cured on its own with time. For pregnant women, hepatitis E is a dangerous infection, and can cause serious complications, including liver failure and death for the mother. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis E. A person infected with the virus should rest, drink plenty of water, eat nutritious food, and avoid alcohol. Basic medications such as Panado/Paracetamol (acetaminophen) is not recommended because Panado is broken down by the liver and when the liver function is not working properly, taking this drug can further damage the liver.

The overall case fatality rate during an outbreak is approximately 1%. However, for pregnant women, the case fatality rate can be 10-30%. Pregnant women who think they may have been exposed to, or have symptoms consistent with hepatitis E infection, should seek medical attention immediately.

Once a person has contracted the virus, he or she can possibly infect other people if this person does not practise adequate hygiene measures. This is why handwashing with single-use water is so important. This could be from a tap, or any clean water being poured over your hands. This should not include a basin where many people use the same water to wash their hands. If a person infected with hepatitis E does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the toilet, he or she can pass the virus to other people when shaking hands, preparing food, collecting water that others will use, or by touching something that another person touches. A person can transmit the virus before he or she experiences symptoms, and will continue to spread the virus for as long as he or she is infected. You can be infected with hepatitis E for a long time (15-60 days) before you show any symptoms. This can make it easy for the virus to be passed from person to person. It also makes it difficult to know how the person became infected.

To help prevent infection, good sanitation, clean food preparation and water storage in clean containers and use of clean water are critical. This responsibility applies to government, the municipality, local leadership and, importantly, individuals. While the government has a duty to provide access to clean water, communities and individuals can do many simple things to improve their own situation. This includes using clean, covered water containers, peeling or cooking vegetables and fruit, cooking food and boiling water thoroughly before consuming, avoiding undercooked food, frequent handwashing and keeping toilet/latrines clean and separate from water sources.

Through support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, students studying epidemiology have been capacitated to work with local communities on how to improve water and sanitation processes, including how to set up simple handwashing facilities when running water is not available. These measures, and support from other partners such as WHO and Unicef, have played an important role in helping the Ministry of Health and Social Services and other government partners, work towards ending the Hepatitis E outbreak. ♀