

Quick Facts

About... Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis (sometimes called aseptic meningitis), is an infection of the lining surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis can be caused by different viruses, including enteroviruses, herpes simplex viruses, or mumps virus, and is usually less severe than bacterial meningitis. While viral meningitis can occur at any time of the year, it most often occurs in late summer or early fall.

How is viral meningitis spread?

Because viral meningitis can be caused by different viruses, it can be spread a variety of ways. Some of the most common ways that viral meningitis can be spread include:

- Coughing or sneezing in someone's face
- Not washing hands after using the toilet
- Sharing eating or drinking utensils with an infected person
- Kissing an infected person

If come in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, you have a small chance of actually developing symptoms of meningitis. Actually, many people who are exposed do not become ill, and most infected with these viruses develop only mild illness, such as a head cold or rash. Rarely, serious infection can develop.

Who is at risk for viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis occurs more commonly in children, although anyone can get viral meningitis.

What are the signs of being sick with viral meningitis?

Symptoms of viral meningitis include:

- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Red rash
- Nausea and vomiting

In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify but may include:

- Fever
- Fretfulness or irritability
- Poor appetite
- Difficulty in waking the baby

How do I know if I have viral meningitis?

In the early stages of meningitis, the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis may be the same. Therefore, it is extremely important for anyone with these symptoms to consult a health care provider right away. Viral meningitis can be serious but rarely fatal. Symptoms usually last 7-10 days and most people make a full recovery.

Your health care provider may collect spinal fluid to rule out bacterial meningitis. The virus causing the illness can be identified by growing the virus from a sample of the spinal fluid.

How can viral meningitis be treated?

Early antibiotic treatment is necessary for recovery from bacterial meningitis but is not useful for viral meningitis. Health care providers often recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medications to help relieve some of the symptoms.

How is viral meningitis prevented?

As with most infectious diseases, the risk for viral meningitis can be reduced by good personal hygiene. It is important to clean your hands regularly, especially after:

- Coughing or sneezing
- Before and after caring for a sick person
- After using the toilet or changing diapers

It is very important to teach children to clean their hands often and properly, using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Another way to prevent viral meningitis is to avoid sharing eating utensils and/or drink containers.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent this disease?

There are vaccines to prevent infections from a few viruses that can cause viral meningitis, making it important to keep children's immunizations current. Contact your healthcare provider if you have questions about vaccines.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_meningitis.htm

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