

Viral Meningitis Fact Sheet

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an illness in which there is inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis, which is the most common type, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

The symptoms of meningitis are not the same for every person. The more common symptoms are fever, severe headache, stiff neck, photophobia (when bright lights hurt the eyes), drowsiness or confusion, nausea, and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify. They may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty in awakening the baby or refusal to eat.

Is viral meningitis a serious disease?

Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems. Usually, the symptoms last from 7 to 10 days and the person recovers completely. Often, the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are the same. For this reason, if you think you or your child has meningitis, see your doctor as soon as possible.

What causes viral meningitis?

Many different viruses can cause meningitis. About 90% of cases of viral meningitis are caused by members of a group of viruses known as enteroviruses, such as coxsackieviruses and echoviruses. Herpesviruses and the mumps virus also cause aseptic meningitis.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Viral meningitis is usually diagnosed by laboratory tests of spinal fluid obtained with a spinal tap. It can also be diagnosed by tests that identify the virus in other specimens collected from the patient, but these tests are not usually done.

How is viral meningitis treated?

No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients recover completely on their own, and doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids and medication to relieve the symptoms of fever and headache.

Can I get viral meningitis if I am around someone who has it?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious. Enteroviruses, for example, are very common during the summer and early fall and many people are exposed to them; however, most infected persons either have no symptoms or develop only an upper respiratory infection or rash with low-grade fever. Typically, less than 1 of every 1000 persons infected actually develops meningitis. Therefore, if you are around someone who has viral meningitis, you have a moderate chance of becoming infected, but a very small chance of developing meningitis.

How is the virus spread?

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (i.e. saliva, sputum or nasal mucus). This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled and then rubbing your own nose, mouth or eyes. The virus may also be found in the stool of persons who are infected. The virus is spread through this route mainly among small children who are not yet toilet trained. It may also be spread this way to adults from changing the diapers of an infected infant. The incubation period is usually between 3-7 days from the time you are infected until you develop symptoms. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after you develop symptoms.

How can I reduce my chances of becoming infected?

Because most persons who are infected with enteroviruses do not become sick, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. If you are in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, the most effective method of prevention is to wash your hands thoroughly and often. In institutional settings, such as child care centers, washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (made by mixing 1 capful of household bleach with 1 gallon water) can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus.