



Viral Meningitis

What is meningitis?

The term meningitis is used to describe swelling of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. This can occur due to infection by bacteria, viruses, or fungi. Bacterial meningitis is a rare, but serious, condition that could result in death or disability if not promptly treated. Viral meningitis is a more common disease that is rarely serious. In general, people with viral meningitis recover fully.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Fever, severe headache, stiff neck, difficulty looking at bright light, being tired or sleepy, mental confusion, nausea and vomiting are all common symptoms. Symptoms in an infant may be harder to detect, but can include fever, fretfulness or irritability, refusal to eat, or difficulty in waking. Unfortunately, viral and bacterial meningitis often have similar symptoms. It is important to see a health care professional immediately if you or your child has these symptoms.

What causes viral meningitis?

The Enterovirus group of viruses causes nearly 80-85% of all cases of viral meningitis. These viruses are spread in the feces and respiratory secretions of an infected person. They can be passed from person to person due to improper hand washing or direct contact with sputum, saliva or nasal mucus. Enterovirus meningitis cases are most often seen in the summer and early fall.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Because the symptoms of bacterial and viral meningitis can be so similar, a spinal tap is usually performed. A small amount of spinal fluid is removed and tested in order to make an accurate diagnosis.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis currently. Most people recover from the illness with bed rest, fluids, and medication to reduce fever and pain.

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

While the viruses that cause viral meningitis can be spread from person to person, they rarely cause disease in persons that are exposed to them. Most people have come into contact with the viruses at some point in their life and have some immunity to them. Viral meningitis occurs most often in children and adolescents. A healthy person exposed to a person with viral meningitis may either have no symptoms at all or reduced symptoms, such as a low-grade fever, cold or rash.

If I was exposed to a person with viral meningitis, how long will it be before I feel sick?

It takes between 3 and 7 days from the time you are infected until you begin to develop symptoms. You can 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?

The most effective method for preventing viral meningitis is regular, thorough hand washing, especially before eating. In institutions, such as childcare centers, washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (1 capful of household bleach to 1 gallon of water) can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus. Adults and older children caring for diapered children may be at higher risk for contracting viral meningitis and should practice good personal hygiene.