

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Infectious meningitis may be caused by bacteria, viruses, or fungi. Viral (aseptic) meningitis is the most common form of meningitis and is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. It is usually relatively mild, and most persons with viral meningitis recover fully. However, bacterial meningitis is a more severe disease that requires prompt treatment.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms of viral meningitis may include fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and fatigue, which usually appear one week after exposure. These symptoms are often difficult to identify in infants, who, when suffering from viral meningitis may become irritable, lethargic, inconsolable, or refuse to eat. Since viral and bacterial meningitis often have similar symptoms, it is important to see a healthcare provider immediately if you or your child has these symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear after infection?

Symptoms generally appear between three to seven days after exposure. The symptoms will then usually last for seven to ten days.

What causes viral meningitis?

Approximately 90% of cases are due to a group of common viruses called enteroviruses, such as coxsackieviruses and echoviruses. These viruses are more common during the summer and fall months. Occasionally, viral meningitis is also associated with mumps or herpes virus infections.

How are the viruses that cause viral meningitis spread?

Enteroviruses are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus), but these viruses can also be spread through direct or indirect contact with fecal material. You can spread the virus to someone else beginning about three days after you are infected until about ten days after you develop symptoms.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Viral meningitis is usually diagnosed by laboratory tests of spinal fluid obtained from a spinal tap. During a spinal tap, your doctor will insert a needle into the lower back and collect the fluid from inside the spine.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most patients will completely recover on their own with bed rest and plenty of fluids, however health care providers often will recommend medicine to relieve fever and headache.

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

While the viruses that can potentially cause meningitis can be passed person to person, very few exposed will actually develop meningitis. Viral meningitis occurs most often in children and adolescents, but a healthy person exposed to these viruses may either have mild symptoms such as a low-grade fever, flu-like symptoms, or a rash; or no symptoms at all. Therefore, if you are around someone who has viral meningitis, you have a moderate chance of getting one of the viruses, but a very small chance of developing meningitis.

How can I reduce my chances of becoming infected?

Pay careful attention to personal hygiene – **hand hygiene** helps prevent infection with many of the viruses that can cause viral meningitis. Wash hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet, after changing diapers, and before preparing and eating food. Use alcohol-based hand gels when hands are not visibly soiled. In institutions, such as child care centers, washing objects and surfaces with a diluted bleach solution can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus. For hard surfaces such as diaper-changing areas and bathrooms, use a 1:10 dilution of bleach (mix one cup of bleach with one gallon of water). For other objects such as toys and eating utensils, use a weaker form of bleach solution (mix one tablespoon of bleach with one gallon of water).

OSDH 03/07

