

Viral Meningitis- Factsheet

What is viral meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord (called meninges). Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis. Even though this form of meningitis is often less severe than bacterial meningitis, and most people get better on their own without any specific treatment, it is important for a healthcare provider to determine what type of meningitis you have because some types can be serious and require specific treatment.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Symptoms depend on the age of the person with viral meningitis. Some common symptoms in babies include fever, irritability, poor eating, sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep, and a lack of energy. Symptoms more common in children and adults include fever, headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to bright light, sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep, nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, irritability, and lack of energy.

How is viral meningitis spread?

If you have close contact with a person who has viral meningitis, you may become infected with the virus that made that person sick; however, you are not likely to develop meningitis because only a small number of people who get infected with those viruses will actually develop viral meningitis. The viruses that can cause meningitis can be found in an infected person's feces (stool), eye, nose and mouth secretions (like saliva, nasal mucus, or sputum), or blister fluid so you can be exposed by having close contact with them, touching objects or surfaces with the viruses on them and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth, or by changing diapers of an infected person.

How long are people contagious?

Depending on the specific cause of the viral meningitis, the infected person generally becomes contagious once their symptoms have started and continuing for approximately 7-10 days.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis, but some people have a higher chance of getting the disease including children younger than 5 years of age and people with weakened immune systems caused by diseases, medications (such as chemotherapy), or recent organ or bone marrow transplantations. People with weakened immune systems and babies younger than one month of age are more likely to get severe illness.

What treatment is available for people with viral meningitis?

There is no specific treatment in most cases, except when it is caused by certain viruses such as herpesvirus and influenza, which will usually require antiviral medication. Most people who get mild viral meningitis recover completely on their own without specific treatment other than rest, plenty of fluids, and over-the-counter medications if needed to help relieve symptoms such as fever, headache and body aches. Since bacterial meningitis or meningitis caused by the herpes virus can be life threatening if not treated, it is important to know the cause of illness.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

If you have been diagnosed with viral meningitis, you will want to stay away from school or work until you have recovered.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting viral meningitis?

Most viral meningitis is caused by non-polio enteroviruses for which there are no vaccines. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the toilet or changing diapers. Avoid close contact, such as kissing, hugging, or sharing cups or eating utensils with people who are sick. Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands. Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces such as toys and doorknobs, especially if someone is sick. Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your upper shirt sleeve, not your hands. Stay home when you are sick. Make sure that you and your children are vaccinated for measles, mumps, chickenpox, and influenza that can cause viral meningitis.