



Fact Sheet: Viral Meningitis

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord caused by infection. It is caused by a viral or bacterial infection. The infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord causes the swelling.

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis, meningitis caused by a virus, is the most common and less severe form of meningitis that is also known as aseptic meningitis. It resolves without any treatment within 7 to 10 days.

Non-polio enteroviruses are the most common cause of viral meningitis in the United States. They are common viruses that are spread among people by secretions from the gastrointestinal tract or respiratory secretions, typically only causing mild common cold symptoms or none at all. Most people who get infected with non-polio enteroviruses, like a cold, do not get sick or have only mild illness. Non-polio enteroviruses are responsible for about 15 million infections a year.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Symptoms usually begin within three or four days after exposure to the germ. However, onset may vary from as early as two days to as late as 10 days. Usually, people either do not get sick at all from the germs that cause meningitis, or they have mild flulike symptoms. In more serious cases, symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Irritability
- Poor eating
- Lethargy (lack of energy)
- Discomfort looking into bright light
- Confusion
- Sleepiness

In newborns and young babies, these symptoms may be hard to detect. The baby may appear slow or inactive, be irritable, have vomiting, or eat poorly.

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

There is no specific treatment. People typically only need to treat their symptoms. This includes drinking enough fluids to stay hydrated and taking over-the-counter cold medications as needed. Most people recover completely. Any concerns about your symptoms, please contact a health care provider.

Can viral meningitis be spread from person to person?

Viruses that cause meningitis can be spread via respiratory secretions (nose, mouth, eye secretions), blister fluid or from stool of an infected person. Contact with an individual with viral meningitis may increase one's chances of becoming infected with the virus that made them sick, but those infected will have a small chance of developing meningitis as a complication due to their illness.

A person can get exposed to a virus from an infected person by

- Close contact such as touching or shaking hands
- Touching objects or surfaces that have a virus on them, then touching eyes, nose or mouth before washing their hands
- Changing diapers, then touching eyes, nose, mouth before washing their hands
- Drinking water that has the virus in it

Once infected a person can shed (pass from your body into the environment) the virus for several weeks, even if they do not have symptoms.

Should a child be kept home from school who has been diagnosed with viral meningitis?

There are no specific exclusions from school for viral meningitis, but hospitalization is common if the infection does not get better in a few days or if the child begins to feel worse.

Who gets viral meningitis?

People of any age can get meningitis. It is more common among:

- Children younger than 5 years of age
- Young adults
- Elderly

People with certain blood clotting disorders and those who have lost their spleen are also more likely to get meningitis.

How is it prevented?

Since most people who are infected do not become sick, it can be hard to prevent the spread of the germ. However, good personal hygiene and hand washing lowers a person's chance of getting infected.

The best way to help protect yourself and others from non-polio enterovirus infections is to

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds, especially after using the toilet or changing diapers
- Avoid close contact, such as touching and shaking hands, with people who are sick
- Clean and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces

Is there a vaccine for viral meningitis?

No. There are only vaccines for certain types of bacterial meningitis.