

Viral Meningitis

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention
An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

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What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a swelling of the meninges, the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis, the most common type of aseptic meningitis, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. Meningitis can also be caused by infections with several types of bacteria or fungi. Viral meningitis is usually less severe than bacterial meningitis.

What causes viral meningitis?

There are many types of viral infections that can cause viral meningitis. Most cases in the U.S. are caused by enteroviruses, a group of common intestinal viruses. Other viral infections that can lead to meningitis are mumps, herpes virus infections, and influenza. Arboviruses, which are spread by mosquitoes and other insects, can also cause illness that leads to viral meningitis.

How is meningitis spread?

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are typically spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (saliva and mucus). This usually happens by kissing or shaking hands with a person who is ill or touching something they handled, and then rubbing your own nose, eyes, or mouth. The virus can be found in the stool of persons who are infected. The virus can also be spread among children who are not toilet trained, or among adults changing the diapers of a child who is ill.

The time from when a person is exposed until they develop symptoms (incubation period) is usually between 3 and 7 days for enteroviruses. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3 days after infection until the symptoms go away. Young children and people with weakened immune systems may spread the infection after symptoms resolve.

What are the signs and symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms of meningitis may not be the same for every person. Common symptoms are high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, drowsiness, nausea, and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify and may include fever, irritability, lack of appetite and difficulty waking the infant up.

How will I know if I have viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is diagnosed by laboratory tests of spinal fluid taken from a spinal tap. The tests show if a

person is infected and whether they are infected with a virus, bacteria, or fungus.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most patients recover completely on their own within 7 to 10 days. Healthcare providers often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

How can I prevent viral meningitis?

Good hygiene can help prevent the spread of viruses, including the ones that cause viral meningitis.

- Wash hands often with soap and water.
- Cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing and throw away used tissues.
- Avoid sharing straws, cups, water bottles, and eating utensils.
- Disinfect contaminated surfaces and objects, such as doorknobs and countertops, by using a diluted bleach solution (made by mixing ¼ cup household bleach with 1 gallon water).
- If you are taking care of someone with viral meningitis wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning the bathroom, helping with toileting, changing diapers or handling soiled clothing or bed linens.

What about work and daycare?

A person with viral meningitis may return to work or daycare when they have recovered. There are no special recommendations for exclusion from work or daycare.

How common is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is a common disease and appears most frequently in the late summer and early fall. Most people with viral meningitis will recover fully within a week. It appears most commonly in infants less than 1 year but can affect persons at any age.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.

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Sources of Information: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov> (accessed 12/21/10)

Illinois Department of Public Health <http://www.idph.state.il.us> (accessed 12/21/10)

California Department of Public Health <http://www.cdph.ca.gov> (accessed 12/21/10)

Wisconsin Department of Health Services <http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov> (accessed 12/21/10)