
Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissue and fluid surrounding a person's spinal cord and brain. It can be caused by infection, among other things. The most common infectious causes are viruses. These include enteroviruses, herpes viruses and arboviruses, like West Nile Virus.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Illness can be sudden, but more commonly develops over several days. Symptoms are quite variable but can include fever, headache, sensitivity to light, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and fatigue.

How does viral meningitis spread?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis are spread in different ways. Enterovirus can be spread with direct contact with an infected person's stool, or through direct or indirect contact with respiratory secretions, such as saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus. Other viruses such as mumps and varicella-zoster virus can also be spread through contact with respiratory secretions, such as saliva or sputum. This can occur through coughing, sneezing, and kissing, as well as sharing food, cups or eating utensils. However, even if the virus is contracted from an infected person, there is only a small chance of this virus developing into meningitis.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Anyone with fever and a severe headache or stiff neck should see a doctor immediately. Diagnosis may involve testing of samples of spinal fluid and blood to look for evidence of infection.

How long is someone with viral meningitis infectious to others?

Persons with viral meningitis are usually not infectious to others.

How serious is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is serious, but usually less severe than bacterial meningitis. It is often self-limiting, meaning that people can recover fully with time and rest.

What can I do to prevent getting viral meningitis?

The best way to decrease the risk of getting viral meningitis is through practicing good hygiene. Thoroughly wash hands after using the restroom, diaper changes, after coughing or sneezing and before eating or preparing food. Regularly disinfect commonly touched items such as doorknobs, TV remote controls, light switches and keyboards. Cover coughs and sneezes with your elbow and avoid sharing glasses and eating utensils with those who are sick. Vaccines can protect against some of the viruses that can lead to viral meningitis, such as measles, mumps and chickenpox.

Is there any treatment for viral meningitis?

Treatment for viral meningitis usually includes rest, hydration and medicine for fever and headache. Most patients usually recover on their own in about two weeks; however hospitalization may be necessary for severe cases or for those with weak immune systems. Antibiotics will not be helpful in viral meningitis.

For more information about viral meningitis, please refer to the DHHS website at www.dhhs.nh.gov or call Communicable Disease Control at (603) 271-4496.