

Viral Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis refers to an swelling of the membranes of the brain or spinal cord. It is a general term and does not refer to whatever is causing the inflammation. Anyone can develop meningitis, although the three causes mentioned below are more common in infants and children less than 5 years old.

When most people talk about meningitis they are referring to any of the following:

- meningococcal meningitis, caused by the bacteria, Neisseria
- meningitidis; haemophilus meningitis, caused by the bacteria, Haemophilus influenzae; or
- viral meningitis (often called aseptic meningitis) which is caused by any number of viruses.

What viruses cause meningitis?

Many different viruses can cause meningitis such as chickenpox, measles and mumps, but most cases are caused by enteroviruses, such as coxsackievirus and echovirus.

Meningococcal meningitis is an uncommon, but serious health threat. Usually the disease occurs as single, isolated cases, and rarely does it cause an outbreak.

How is viral meningitis spread?

Viral meningitis is fairly common, almost always occurring as single, isolated events. The disease is more common in the summer and early fall, but this can vary depending upon the type of virus that is causing the infection.

The viruses that cause meningitis are spread person-to-person either through the air or by the fecal-oral route. Contamination of surfaces, such as toys, with enteroviruses allows transmission when a child puts the toy in his/her mouth or he/she handles the toy and then puts their fingers in their mouth.

It must be remembered that the viruses associated with meningitis usually do not cause meningitis. Rather, the viruses typically cause respiratory illnesses, diarrhea, rashes, or eye infections. And, depending on the virus, the person may not have any disease symptoms but still be passing the virus to other people.

What are the symptoms?

The onset of symptoms of meningitis varies with the type of virus causing the infection.

With enteroviruses symptoms may appear 3 to 6 days after exposure. Symptoms typically include fever, headache, vomiting, stiff neck, and possibly a rash. The illness usually does not exceed 10 days and recovery is usually complete.

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

In general, treatment consists of pain management and rehydration, if necessary.

Should a person who has been in contact with a diagnosed case of viral meningitis be treated?

Antibiotics do not work against viruses, so there is no treatment given to family members or other close contacts.

Can I be vaccinated against viral meningitis?

Yes and no. There are no vaccines used to prevent viral meningitis, however, there are vaccines against the typical diseases caused by some of the viruses associated with meningitis, such as the measles, mumps and chickenpox vaccines. There are no vaccines against the most common cause of viral meningitis - the enteroviruses.