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What is viral meningitis?

'Meningitis' means inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. 'Viral meningitis' means that meningitis has occurred due to an infection with a virus. Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis and can be caused by many different viruses. Most cases in the United States are caused by non-polio enteroviruses. Viral meningitis is usually less serious than meningitis that is caused by bacteria or fungi.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis can affect anyone. The illness occurs more often in children younger than 5 years old and people with weakened immune systems. Infants younger than 1 month old and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to have severe illness.

How is viral meningitis spread?

The viruses that can cause meningitis are spread in different ways and cause different types of illnesses. These illnesses can get worse over time, sometimes progressing to serious illness in the form of meningitis. People do not tend to catch meningitis from each other. Rather, they catch the viruses that can result in meningitis. A lot of people can catch a virus and have a milder illness while very few go on to develop viral meningitis.

Non-polio enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through contact with the feces (stool) of an infected person, such as by changing diapers of an infected person, then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth before washing your hands. Other viruses that cause meningitis are spread through contact with the eye, nose, and mouth secretions of an infected person (like saliva, nasal mucus or sputum). You can get the virus by touching a person's hand, objects, or surfaces that have the virus on them (e.g., if a person sneezed or coughed onto that object or surface), then touching your nose, eyes, or mouth before washing your hands. Insects such as mosquitoes can also spread viruses that can cause meningitis.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis include the sudden onset of fever with headache, stiff neck, muscle aches, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and a lack of energy. More severe symptoms include confusion, sensitivity to bright light, and seizures. Most symptoms last from seven to ten days. In babies, meningitis can be hard to identify. Babies with meningitis might have a fever, cry often, have trouble waking up, and refuse to eat. Depending on the virus, a rash might appear.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear three to six days after exposure.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

If meningitis is suspected, doctors might collect samples of blood and/or fluid near the spinal cord and send them to the laboratory for testing. Samples from other body sites might also be collected. The laboratory will run tests on the samples to confirm that a virus is causing the meningitis. Doctors also order tests to make sure that the patient does not have a more serious illness, such as bacterial meningitis, which requires different treatment.

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Treatment usually involves measures to relieve symptoms. Because the illness is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not useful for treatment and will not make the patient feel better. Most patients recover without treatment within seven to ten days.

How can viral meningitis be prevented?

You can prevent the spread of the viruses that cause viral meningitis by:

- Washing your hands carefully and thoroughly with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom or changing diapers;
- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, and using disposable tissues to wipe your nose;
- Avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands;
- Avoiding kissing or sharing food, drinks, eating utensils, lipstick, or other such items when you are sick;
- Washing objects and surfaces with a diluted bleach solution (following the directions on the bleach container) to destroy the viruses that can cause meningitis;
- Staying home when you are sick;
- Avoiding bites from mosquitoes and other insects;
- Controlling mice and rats; and
- Making sure you and your child are vaccinated. Vaccinations included in the childhood vaccination schedule can protect children against some diseases that can lead to viral meningitis. These include vaccines against measles, mumps, and chickenpox.

How can I get more information about viral meningitis?

- If you have concerns about viral meningitis, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC's page on viral meningitis](#).

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