

Viral Meningitis

Community and Public Health

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Meningitis is the inflammation of the lining that covers the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by a wide range of bacteria, viruses, and chemicals.

Viral meningitis (also known as non-bacterial meningitis) is caused by a number of different viruses and is relatively common. Less than 1 in 100 people who get infected will develop meningitis. Outbreaks are rare, as it mostly occurs as a single event.

Anyone can get viral meningitis, but it is most common in young children and those under 40 years of age.

DON'T WAIT — TAKE ACTION!

Urgent medical attention should be sought as the symptoms are similar to bacterial meningitis.

Visit your general practitioner for correct diagnosis and treatment.

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms include the sudden onset of:

- Fever;
- Severe headache;
- Stiff neck;
- Bright lights hurt eyes (photophobia);
- Drowsiness or confusion; and
- Nausea and vomiting.

A rash and gastrointestinal symptoms (such as diarrhoea) may also occur.

Infants are more difficult to diagnose, as they may:

- Appear extremely irritable;
- Refuse to eat;
- Have vomiting; or
- Have difficulty waking.

Symptoms generally appear 7 days after exposure to a virus. A person is infectious and can spread the virus between 3 to 10 days after onset of symptoms, depending on the underlying cause of the infection.

Your doctor will advise you of the infectious period of your illness.

How is it caught or spread?

Most people are exposed to the many different viruses that cause viral meningitis throughout their lives without developing the illness. In most cases where illness occurs the virus responsible is never identified.

Viruses can be spread through different means including:

- People coughing and sneezing;
- Poor hygiene such as not washing hands after going to the toilet or changing nappies; and
- Contact with water polluted with sewage.

There is a moderate chance of becoming infected with the virus if you have been near someone who has viral meningitis. However the chance of developing meningitis is very small.

How is spread prevented?

The most effective method of preventing spread of the virus is to wash your hands thoroughly and often, especially after going to the toilet.

Hand washing is important for people changing nappies of young children that are infected.

Routine cleaning of surfaces with a dilute bleach solution may be necessary in an institutional setting such as early childhood centres, rest homes and hospitals.

People with viral meningitis don't need to be specifically isolated as the viruses that cause the illness are commonly found in the environment.

How is it treated?

There is no vaccine or specific treatment for viral meningitis. Bed rest, plenty of fluids and medicine to relieve symptoms such as fever and headache are recommended.

Most patients recover completely within 7 to 10 days.

Staying away from work, school or preschool

Those infected may need to stay away from work or school during the infectious period—discuss this with your doctor. People may return to work when they feel well enough.

Other resources available on infectious illnesses:

- Campylobacter, E. coli and Salmonella
- Cryptosporidium and Giardia
- Meningococcal Disease
- Norovirus
- Pertussis (Whooping Cough)
- Tuberculosis (TB)

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