

Viral Meningitis- FAQ

(aseptic meningitis, non-bacterial meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis, an inflammation of the tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord. It is often less severe than bacterial meningitis, and most people get better on their own (without treatment). However, it's very important for anyone with symptoms of meningitis to see a healthcare provider as soon as possible because some types of meningitis can be very serious, and only a doctor can determine the type of disease you have.

What causes viral meningitis?

Non-polio enteroviruses are the most common cause of viral meningitis in the United States, especially from late summer to early fall when these viruses spread most often. However, only a small number of people who get infected with enteroviruses will actually develop meningitis. Other viruses that can cause meningitis are mumps virus, measles virus, herpes viruses, influenza virus, and arboviruses.

Who can get viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis, but the illness is more often seen in children and people with weakened immune systems.

How do you get viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is usually caused by enteroviruses, viruses commonly found in respiratory droplets (sneezes, coughs, spit) and stool. The virus can then pass from one person to another through close contact, such as touching or shaking hands, with an infected person or by touching objects or surfaces that have the virus on them, then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth before washing your hands. Also, changing diapers of an infected person, then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth before washing your hands could expose you to the virus.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Common symptoms include fever, headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to bright light, sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep, nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, and lack of energy.

When do people get viral meningitis?

Late summer and early fall are when most people get sick with viral meningitis.

When would I start to feel sick? How long after being sick could I pass it to someone?

Symptoms appear within three to six days after being exposed to the virus. You can pass the virus to others for several weeks after getting the infection, even after you no longer feel sick so it is important to always wash your hands.

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How long does viral meningitis last?

Most people who get sick with viral meningitis usually feel better completely in seven to ten days.

Is a person with viral meningitis contagious?

Enteroviruses, which cause most cases of viral meningitis, are contagious. Fortunately, most people exposed to these viruses experience mild or no symptoms. Most people are exposed to these viruses at some time in their lives, but few actually develop meningitis.

What should I do if I think I am sick with viral meningitis?

See your healthcare provider. Your physician will treat your symptoms by recommending bed rest and drinking plenty of fluids, but there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Because viral meningitis is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not used to treat it, and will not make you feel better. Meningitis can only be diagnosed by doing specific lab tests on specimens from a person suspected of having meningitis.

How can viral meningitis be prevented?

There are no vaccines to protect against non-polio enteroviruses, which are the most common cause of viral meningitis. The following steps can be taken to help lower your chances of getting infected with non-polio enteroviruses or spreading them to other people:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after changing diapers, using the toilet, or coughing or blowing your nose.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact such as kissing, hugging, or sharing cups or eating utensils with people who are sick.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your upper shirt sleeve, not your hands.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as toys and doorknobs, especially if someone is sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.

For other causes of viral meningitis, such as measles, mumps, chickenpox, and influenza, there are vaccines that can prevent the illness. Make sure you and your child are vaccinated on schedule.

Also, mosquitos can carry viruses that can lead to viral meningitis so protect yourself and your family from mosquito bites by using insect repellent and wearing long sleeve shirts and pants when outdoors.