

Viral Meningitis (aseptic meningitis, nonbacterial meningitis)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is viral meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges, the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Bacteria, fungi or viruses may cause infectious meningitis. Viral (aseptic) meningitis, the most common form of meningitis, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms may include fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting and fatigue. These symptoms are often difficult to identify in infants, who may become irritable, lethargic, and inconsolable or refuse to eat. Viral meningitis is rarely fatal, unlike bacterial meningitis, which often presents with the same symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear between 3-7 days after exposure. The symptoms usually last 7-10 days and the person completely recovers.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis but it occurs most often in children. Most cases occur in late summer and early autumn.

Which viruses cause this form of meningitis?

Approximately 90% of cases are due to a group of common intestinal viruses called enteroviruses, including coxsackie viruses and echoviruses. Occasionally, viral meningitis is also associated with mumps or herpes virus infections. Viruses carried by mosquitoes also account for a few cases each year in Wisconsin (see Arboviral Infections fact sheet).

How are the viruses that cause viral meningitis spread?

Because a number of different viruses are capable of causing viral meningitis, the manner in which the virus is spread depends upon the type of virus involved. Some are spread by direct or indirect contact with fecal material or possibly respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum or nasal mucus) from an infected person. Mosquitoes spread others however these infections are rare (see Arboviral Infections fact sheet). You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3-days after you are infected until about 10 -days after you develop symptoms.

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 less than 1 in every 1000 persons infected actually develop meningitis. The viruses that are spread by mosquitoes are rarely spread from person to person (see Arboviral Infections fact sheet).

Should a person with viral meningitis be isolated?

Strict isolation is not necessary. Since most cases are due to enteroviruses that may be passed in the stool and possibly through respiratory secretions, people diagnosed with viral meningitis should be instructed to thoroughly wash their hands after using the toilet or blowing their noses. The infected person should also cover coughs and sneezes.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There are no specific medicines or antibiotics used to treat viral meningitis. However, doctors often administer medicines to relieve the fever and headache and recommend bed rest and fluids. Most patients recover completely after 7-10 days.