

Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis (when meningitis is caused by a virus) is the most common type of meningitis. Most people get better on their own without treatment. However, anyone with symptoms of meningitis should see a doctor right away because any type of meningitis can be serious. Only a doctor can determine if someone has meningitis, what is causing it, and the best treatment. Babies younger than 1 month old and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to have severe illness from viral meningitis.

Who is at risk for viral meningitis?

People of any age can get viral meningitis. However, some people have a higher risk of getting the disease, including:

- Children younger than 5 years old
- People with weakened immune systems caused by diseases, medications (such as chemotherapy), and recent organ or bone marrow transplantations

Babies younger than 1 month old and people with weakened immune systems are also more likely to have severe illness.

How does viral meningitis spread?

Close contacts of someone with viral meningitis can become infected with the virus that made that person sick. However, these close contacts are not likely to develop meningitis. Only a small number of people who get infected with the viruses that cause meningitis will develop viral meningitis.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Common symptoms in babies:

- Fever
- Irritability
- Poor eating
- Sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep
- Lethargy (a lack of energy)

Common symptoms in children and adults:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck
- Photophobia (eyes being more sensitive to light)
- Sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep
- Nausea
- Irritability
- Vomiting
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy (a lack of energy)

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose meningitis by ordering specific lab tests on specimens from a person suspected of having meningitis. If a doctor suspects meningitis, he or she may collect samples for testing by:

- Swabbing your nose or throat
- Obtaining a stool sample
- Taking some blood
- Drawing fluid from around your spinal cord

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

In most cases, there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most people who get mild viral meningitis usually recover completely in 7 to 10 days without treatment. Antiviral medicine may help people with meningitis caused by viruses such as herpesvirus and influenza.

Antibiotics do not help viral infections, so they are not useful in the treatment of viral meningitis. However, antibiotics do fight bacteria, so they are very important when treating bacterial meningitis.

People who develop severe illness, or are at risk for developing severe illness, may need care in a hospital.

When should you see a healthcare provider?

See a doctor right away if you think you or your child might have meningitis. A doctor can determine if you have the disease, what is causing it, and the best treatment.

How can viral meningitis be prevented?

There are no vaccines available in the United States to protect against non-polio enteroviruses, which are the most common cause of viral meningitis. The best way to help protect yourself and others from non-polio enterovirus infections is to:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after changing diapers or using the toilet
- Avoid close contact, such as touching and shaking hands, with people who are sick
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces
- Stay home when you are sick and keep sick children out of school

Vaccines can protect against some diseases, such as measles, mumps, chickenpox, and influenza, which can lead to viral meningitis. Make sure you and your child are vaccinated on schedule.

Avoid bites from mosquitoes and other insects that carry diseases that can infect humans. Control mice and rats. If you have a rodent in or around your home, follow appropriate cleaning and control precautions.

For more information:

Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <https://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html> or call Huron County Public Health at 419-668-1652 ext. 269.