What is viral meningitis?
Meningitis is an illness in which there is inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or aseptic meningitis, which is the most common type, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. Meningitis can also be caused by infection with certain bacteria and fungi.

How is viral meningitis spread?
Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through direct contact with the respiratory secretions of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing one’s own nose, mouth or eyes. These viruses can also be found in the stool of persons who are infected and can be spread to anyone who handles the diapers of an infected person.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?
The symptoms of viral meningitis may not be the same for every person. The most common symptoms are fever, headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to bright lights, drowsiness or confusion, nausea and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are difficult to identify; they may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty awakening, and refusing to eat.

It is important that people suspected of having meningitis seek medical evaluation. The symptoms of viral meningitis are similar to those of bacterial meningitis, which is usually more severe and can be fatal.

How soon after infection do symptoms of viral meningitis appear?
The incubation period for enteroviruses is usually between three and seven days from the time infection occurs until symptoms develop. Usually, the symptoms last from 7 to 10 days and the patient recovers completely.

When and for how long is a person able to spread viral meningitis?
A person infected with viral meningitis is contagious from three days after the infection occurs up to ten days after symptoms develop.

Does the infection of viral meningitis make a person immune?
Because viral meningitis can be caused by a variety of viruses there is no long term immunity if someone has had viral meningitis in the past.

What are the complications associated with viral meningitis?
Viral meningitis is an illness that usually goes away on its own without treatment or complications.

Are there vaccines for viral meningitis?
There are no vaccines for the prevention of viral meningitis. There are vaccines to protect against bacterial meningitis.

What can be done to prevent the spread of viral meningitis?
Most persons who are infected with enteroviruses do not become sick, and therefore it can be difficult to prevent the spread of these viruses. The most effective method of prevention is to wash hands thoroughly and often. In institutional settings such as child care centers, washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach to ten parts water, made daily) can be very effective in inactivating viruses.

For more information:
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