

Viral Meningitis



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 infections with several types of bacteria or 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. They are spread through this route mainly among small children who are not yet toilet trained. Enteroviruses can also be spread to adults changing the diapers of an infected infant.

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, and nausea and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are difficult to identify. They may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty in awakening the baby, and the baby refusing to eat.

✦ It is important for people suspected of having meningitis to 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 an infection of viral meningitis do the symptoms 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.

Are there vaccines for viral meningitis?

There are no vaccines for the prevention of viral meningitis. However, there is a vaccine for 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 the virus. 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 the virus.

For more information:

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