NJHealth New Jersey Department of Health

Viral Meningitis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges (the covering of the brain and spinal cord) caused by infection with a virus. It is also called aseptic meningitis. Viral meningitis is more common in the summer and early fall. In general, meningitis caused by a virus is less serious than meningitis caused by bacteria.

Which viruses can cause viral meningitis?

About 90% of viral meningitis cases are due to common stomach viruses called enteroviruses, but other viruses can also cause viral meningitis. In many cases, the specific virus that causes the meningitis is not identified. Enteroviruses are passed from person to person through stool or saliva (spit), but most people who come in contact with enteroviruses do not develop an infection. This is because their immune system fights the virus. When people develop an infection from an enterovirus, they usually get only an upset stomach, a cold, or rash with a low fever.

Who gets viral meningitis?

People of all ages can get viral meningitis, but it is more common in children. People with weak immune systems are also at greater risk.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms of viral meningitis are fever, headache, and tiredness. Nausea, stiff neck, and sensitivity to light can also occur. In babies, the symptoms include fever, fussiness, refusing to eat, difficulty waking up, and swelling of the soft spot on the baby's head.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

A health care provider diagnoses viral meningitis by observing the patient's symptoms and testing blood and spinal fluid.

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

In general, there are no medications to fight the germs that cause viral meningitis, so treatment is usually aimed at relieving the patient's symptoms. This includes rest, fluids, and fever-reducing medication.

Can people with viral meningitis pass the illness to others?

The way people get viral meningitis depends on the kind of virus causing the infection. Most cases of viral meningitis are spread by germs contained in the stool or, less often, in tiny drops of fluid from the throat of someone who is infected. This could be a person with meningitis or the more ordinary infection caused by that germ. A rare kind of viral meningitis can be spread by insect bites.

Viral meningitis germs are spread between people who are in direct contact, such as those who live together. Casual contact at school or work with someone who has viral meningitis usually will not transmit the germ. Most people who are exposed to viral meningitis do not get infected because their immune system fights the germ. Getting infected with the viral meningitis germ does not mean a person will get meningitis. In most cases, the germ will simply cause a cold, upset stomach or diarrhea.

Can viral meningitis be prevented?

Most of the germs that can cause viral meningitis are common. Good personal hygiene is an important way of preventing **any** infection. Washing hands thoroughly and often, especially before eating and after using the bathroom, is your first line of defense against the spread of viral meningitis, and many other illnesses too.

Where can I get more information on viral meningitis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention www.cdc.gov

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.
Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.