



Encephalitis

What is encephalitis?

Encephalitis is inflammation of the brain. It may be caused by a variety of viruses, bacteria, parasites, or fungi. Viral encephalitis is more common than bacterial encephalitis and is rarely serious. Most people with viral encephalitis recover fully but sometimes there are long-term effects. Bacterial encephalitis is a rare, but nonetheless serious condition that may result in death or disability if not promptly treated.

What are the symptoms of encephalitis?

Fever, severe headache, stiff neck, difficulty tolerating bright light, feeling overly tired or sleepy, confusion, and often times, nausea and vomiting, are all common symptoms. Complications can include paralysis, seizures, disorientation, coma, and sometimes death. Encephalitis is generally harder to detect in an infant, but symptoms can include fever, irritability, refusal to eat, inconsolable crying, bulging in the soft spots (fontanel) of the skull. If you or your child has these symptoms, it is important to contact your health care provider.

What types of agents can cause encephalitis?

The most common cause of viral encephalitis is Herpes simplex virus, which generally causes cold sores, followed by arboviruses like West Nile Virus. Arboviruses are germs carried by mosquitoes or ticks, and other examples include: St. Louis encephalitis, Western Equine encephalitis, Eastern Equine encephalitis. These viruses are transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito or tick and are not passed person to person. Other viral causes of encephalitis include varicella-zoster virus (chickenpox virus), cytomegalovirus, measles, and mumps. *Bartonella henselae*, *Brucella spp.*, and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* are examples of bacterial causes of encephalitis.

How is encephalitis diagnosed?

Your physician will gather information regarding symptoms, risk factors, and history of activities such as travel and contact persons experiencing similar symptoms. Specimens such as spinal fluid, blood, or a throat swab may be collected to test for the specific cause of encephalitis.

How is encephalitis treated?

There is no specific treatment for most types of viral encephalitis. Most people recover from the illness with bed rest, fluids, and medication to reduce fever and pain. Antiviral medication may be prescribed for herpes simplex virus encephalitis and varicella-zoster virus encephalitis. Antibiotics may be prescribed for bacterial encephalitis.

Can I get encephalitis if I am around someone who has the disease?

Some viruses that cause encephalitis can be spread from person to person by breathing in infected droplets. However, they rarely cause disease in persons that are exposed to them. Many causes of viral encephalitis are not spread person-to-person.

How can I reduce my chances of becoming infected?

The most effective method for preventing viral encephalitis is regular, thorough washing of the hands, especially before eating. In institutions, such as child care centers, washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (one capful of household bleach to one gallon of water) can be a very effective way to inactivate germs that can cause encephalitis. Adults and older children caring for diapered children may be at higher risk for contracting viral encephalitis and should practice good personal hygiene. Arboviral infections can be prevented by taking precautions against mosquito bites, such as using insect repellent, avoiding the outdoors at dusk and dawn, wearing protective clothing like long sleeves and long pants, and draining standing water around and near your home where mosquitoes can breed.