

What is viral meningitis?

Meningitis is a swelling covering of the brain and spinal cord. Viral (aseptic) meningitis is the most common form of meningitis. It is usually a mild illness, and most people with viral meningitis recover fully.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms of viral meningitis may include fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, or vomiting. Infants may be very fussy, drowsy, or refuse to eat. Seek medical care if you or your child has these symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear after infection?

These usually begin about three to seven days after being exposed. As a rule, the illness lasts for seven to ten days.

What causes viral meningitis?

About 90% of viral meningitis is caused by common viruses called enteroviruses. These viruses are more likely to be spread in the summer and fall months. Other more rare types of viral meningitis are caused by the mumps, chicken pox, herpes or West Nile virus. These can cause more severe illness.

How are the viruses that cause viral meningitis spread?

Enteroviruses are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus), but these viruses can also be spread through direct or indirect contact with fecal material. You can spread the virus to someone else beginning about three days after you are infected until about ten days after you develop symptoms.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed and treated?

Spinal fluid is tested to find the type of meningitis, but this test is not always needed. Most of the time, viral meningitis is treated with just bed rest and plenty of fluids. Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicines for fever or headaches.

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

It is very unlikely. Some of the viruses that cause viral meningitis can be spread from person to person, but others such as West Nile virus are not. Most people exposed to these viruses have a mild illness such as low-grade fever, flu-like symptoms, or no symptoms at all. Having meningitis from these viruses is rare.

How can I protect myself from viral meningitis?

Hand hygiene is the most important way to protect yourself and others. Wash your hands often, using soap and water when you can see that your hands are dirty. Wash your hands after using the toilet, after changing diapers, before preparing or eating food, after caring for a sick person, and after touching an animal. Use alcohol-based hand products when your hands already look clean.

Clean surfaces and items such as toys every day and when saliva or nose/throat fluids are on them. In settings such as child care centers, wash objects and surfaces with a diluted bleach solution:

- For hard surfaces such as diaper-changing areas and bathrooms, use a 1:10 dilution of bleach (mix one cup of bleach with one gallon of water).
- For other objects such as toys and eating utensils, use a weaker form of bleach solution (mix one tablespoon of bleach with one gallon of water).

OSDH 02/2013

