

Viral Meningitis (Aseptic or Non-Bacterial Meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is a common disease caused by a virus that infects the outer covering of the brain and spinal cord. It is usually less severe than bacterial meningitis. Most people with viral meningitis recover fully within a week. Every year several thousand people in California get viral meningitis, and the number affected varies widely from year to year. Viral meningitis is more common in the late summer and early fall but can occur at any time. It is much more common in infants less than 1 year old but can occur at any age.

Which viruses cause meningitis?

There are many viruses that can cause meningitis. The most common are viruses that live in the intestines called "enteroviruses". Enteroviruses are spread by contact with an infected person's stool, nose and throat discharge, or saliva. Most people who are infected by these viruses have no symptoms or mild intestinal symptoms. Only a small number of people who are infected by these viruses will get meningitis. Viruses spread by mosquito bites such as the West Nile virus (known as "arboviruses") can also cause meningitis. Other viruses that can cause meningitis are rarer such as measles and mumps, herpes viruses and HIV.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The most common symptoms in people with viral meningitis are fever, headache, stiff neck and fatigue. Some people may also have rash, sore throat, diarrhea or vomiting. Infants may be more irritable or cranky, may not feed as well and may be more sleepy than usual.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

It is difficult to tell the difference by symptoms alone between viral meningitis and more serious forms of meningitis caused by bacteria. Laboratory tests can be done on the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. In outbreaks or unusual patterns of meningitis, the California Department of Public Health, Viral and Rickettsial Disease Laboratory, can assist doctors and local public health departments to determine the specific type of virus involved.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis and most people recover within a week to ten days. Your health care provider may recommend rest, drinking plenty of fluids and prescribe medications to control fever and pain. It is important to see a medical provider if you think you have meningitis because they can test for bacterial meningitis which may need specific medications for treatment.

How can viral meningitis be prevented?

Viral meningitis caused by measles and mumps can be prevented by getting the routine childhood vaccinations. Avoiding mosquito bites can prevent West Nile virus.

Good personal hygiene such as frequent hand washing and not sharing drinks, eating utensils, lipstick or other items that may be contaminated by infected saliva can reduce your chances of getting sick or of spreading the disease to others.

You should always wash your hands with soap and clean water:

- Before eating, drinking or preparing food
- After using the bathroom or changing diapers
- After coughing or sneezing
- After touching your nose or mouth

If soap and water are not available an alcohol based hand sanitizer can be used.

If you are caring for someone with viral meningitis, your chances of getting meningitis are very low but you should wash your hands frequently and clean surfaces and items that come into contact with the person's saliva, nose secretions, or feces with soap and water and then disinfect with dilute bleach (¼ cup of bleach in 1 gallon of water). Strict isolation is not required, however people diagnosed with viral meningitis should not return to school or work until their symptoms are gone.

For more Information:

Please visit:

The California Department of Public Health meningococcal disease webpage
(<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/MeningococcalDisease.aspx>)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention meningitis webpage (<http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/about/faq.html>)