

Viral Meningitis

Aseptic Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral, or aseptic, meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges (the thin membranes covering the brain and spinal cord) that is caused by a variety of viruses (most commonly enteroviruses, but may also include the herpes virus and the mumps). The enteroviruses are most common in the summer and fall months.

Is it contagious?

Viral meningitis is contagious, and is most commonly spread via contact with respiratory secretions of an infected person: by sharing drinking or eating utensils, or by shaking hands, etc. It can also be spread by contact with the stool of an infected person (usually child-to-adult).

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Fever, headache (maybe severe), stiff neck, irritability, sensitivity to light, drowsiness or confusion, nausea and vomiting. However, symptoms may not be the same for all people. In babies symptoms may be difficult to identify: They can include a fever, irritability, difficulty in awakening the baby, and a refusal to eat.

How is it diagnosed?

The only way to positively identify viral meningitis is through laboratory testing of the spinal fluid (obtained via a spinal tap).

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment. Most of those infected recover at home and on their own, with simple bed rest, fluids, and medication to relieve fever and headache.

Is viral meningitis a serious infection?

It is serious, but it is rarely fatal for persons with normal immune systems. Symptoms can last for as little as two days or as many as ten. Permanent damage to the brain or the body is rare.

What can I do to avoid viral meningitis?

Keep your immunizations up to date and maintain a healthy and a balanced diet. Also, don't share eating utensils with others and don't drink after another person.

What increases the risk for contracting it?

Someone who has recently had measles, mumps, rubella or the flu may be at a higher risk, as are those with weakened immune systems. Poor nutritional habits can also weaken the body's ability to resist viruses. Those infected with the herpes virus can also be especially susceptible. Additionally, it can become more severe during an outbreak.