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## What is viral meningitis?

'Meningitis' means inflammation (swelling) of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. 'Viral meningitis' means that meningitis has occurred due to an infection with a virus. Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis. Many viruses can cause meningitis. The leading cause in the United States is by non-polio enteroviruses.

## Who gets viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis. Children younger than 5 years old and people with a weakened immune system are at increased risk for viral meningitis. Infants younger than 1 month old are more likely to have severe illness if they get viral meningitis.

## How is viral meningitis spread?

Many viruses can cause meningitis. These viruses are spread in different ways and cause different types of illnesses. Only a small number of people infected with these viruses go on to develop meningitis.

Non-polio enteroviruses are the most common cause of viral meningitis. Non-polio enteroviruses are most often spread through close contact with an infected person. These viruses can also be spread by touching objects or surfaces contaminated with the virus, then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. This can include changing diapers of an infected person, then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth before washing your hands.

## What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Common meningitis symptoms include the sudden onset of fever with headache and stiff neck. Other symptoms can include muscle aches, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and a lack of energy. More severe symptoms include confusion, sensitivity to bright light, and seizures. In babies, meningitis can be hard to identify. Babies with meningitis may be slow or inactive, be irritable, vomit, feed poorly, have a bulging fontanelle (the "soft spot" on a baby's head), and have abnormal reflexes.

## How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The time between exposure and symptom development depends on the virus causing the illness.

## How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

If healthcare providers suspect meningitis, they may collect samples of blood and/or fluid near the spinal cord for testing. The laboratory will run tests on the samples to determine the cause of meningitis. Knowing the specific cause is important because treatment differs depending on the

cause.

## What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most people with mild viral meningitis usually get better on their own within 7 to 10 days. People who develop severe illness, or are at risk for developing severe illness, may need hospital care. Because the illness is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not useful for treatment and will not make the patient feel better. Antiviral medicine may help people with meningitis caused by viruses such as influenza.

## Do people who have been in contact with someone with viral meningitis need to be tested and treated?

People exposed to someone with viral meningitis should be tested if they develop symptoms.

## How can viral meningitis be prevented?

Many daily healthy habits can help prevent viral infections.

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom or changing diapers.
- Avoid close contact, such as touching and shaking hands, with people who are sick.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or the inside of your elbow, not hands.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hand.
- Avoid kissing or sharing food, drinks, eating utensils, lipstick, or other such items when you are sick.
- Wash objects and surfaces with a diluted bleach solution (following the directions on the bleach container) to destroy the viruses that can cause meningitis.
- Stay home when sick and keep sick children out of school.
- Stay up to date on recommended vaccinations.
  - Visit [cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-schedules/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-schedules/index.html) for recommended vaccines.

## How can I get more information about viral meningitis?

- If you have concerns about viral meningitis, contact a health care provider.
- Contact your local health department. Find your local health department at [vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/](https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/).
- Visit the CDC's page on viral meningitis at [cdc.gov/meningitis/about/viral-meningitis.html](https://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/about/viral-meningitis.html).

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