



Central Michigan District Health Department
“Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities”

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VIRAL (ASEPTIC) MENINGITIS

What is Viral Meningitis?

Meningitis is an illness in which there is swelling of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or “aseptic” meningitis, which is the most common type, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. 90% of cases of viral meningitis are caused by members of a group of viruses known as enteroviruses, such as coxsackieviruses and echoviruses. These viruses are more common during summer and fall months. Herpes viruses and the mumps virus can also cause viral meningitis. In the United States, there are between 25,000 and 50,000 hospitalizations due to viral meningitis each year. Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems.

How is it spread?

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (e.g., saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose or mouth. The virus can also be found in the stool of persons who are infected. The virus is spread through this route mainly among small children who are not yet toilet trained. It can also be spread this way to adults changing the diapers of an infected infant. The incubation period for enteroviruses is usually between 3 and 7 days from the time you are infected until you develop symptoms. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after you develop symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

The more common symptoms of meningitis are fever, severe headache, stiff neck, bright lights hurting the eyes, drowsiness or confusion, and nausea and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify. They may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty in awakening the baby, or the baby refuses to eat. The symptoms of meningitis may not be the same for every person. Often, the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis are the same. Bacterial meningitis can be very serious and result in disability or death if not treated. For this reason, if you think you or your child has meningitis, see your doctor as soon as possible.

What is the treatment for Viral Meningitis?

No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients completely recover on their own. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

How can I guard against the spread of this disease?

Most persons who are infected with enteroviruses do not become sick, so it is difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. Adhering to good personal hygiene can help to reduce your chances of becoming infected. If you are in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, the most effective method of prevention is to wash your hands thoroughly and often. Also, cleaning contaminated surfaces and soiled articles first with soap and water, and then disinfecting them with a dilute solution of chlorine-containing bleach can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus.