



VIRAL MENINGITIS

What is it?

Meningitis is an illness in which there is swelling of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or “aseptic” meningitis is the most common type of meningitis. 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. Viral meningitis can also be caused by other viruses (e.g, herpes simplex, varicella zoster, west nile). Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in persons with healthy immune systems.

How is it spread?

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions of an infected person. The virus can also be found in the stool of persons who are infected and can be spread between small children who are not yet toilet trained and to adults changing the diapers of an infected infant. The incubation period for enterovirus is usually between 3 and 7 days from the time you are infected until the time you develop symptoms. A person with enterovirus is contagious from about 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after they develop symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms of meningitis are fever, severe headache, stiff neck, pain when looking at light (photophobia), drowsiness, confusion, and weakness. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify. They may include fever, fussiness or irritability, tiredness, or refusing 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?

The treatment for viral meningitis varies depending on what virus is causing the meningitis. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

How can I guard myself from the spread of this disease?

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.