



FACT SHEET

Viral Meningitis Disease

Viral meningitis (aseptic meningitis, nonbacterial meningitis) is an infection of the thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord called the meninges. Viral meningitis can be caused by one of a number of viruses. Viral meningitis is a common illness with an average of 42 infections reported per year since 1992. Most infections occur as single, isolated events; however, occasional outbreaks can occur.

- Cause:** Approximately half of the reported cases of viral meningitis in the United States are due to common intestinal viruses (enteroviruses). In addition, the mumps virus and herpes virus can occasionally cause meningitis. Viruses carried by mosquitoes cause a small number of infections each year. Illnesses caused by enteroviruses (coxsackie viruses, echoviruses, polioviruses) occur more often in the summer and early autumn.
- Spread:** Because a number of viruses are capable of causing viral meningitis, the manner in which the virus is spread depends on the type of virus involved. Some are spread by direct or indirect contact with fecal material or possibly respiratory secretions from an infected person. Some viruses are spread by mosquitoes.
- Symptoms:** May include fever, headache, stiff neck, and fatigue. Rash, sore throat, and intestinal symptoms may also occur. Symptoms usually occur within one week of exposure to the virus. The symptoms rarely last over 10 days. Recovery is usually complete.
- 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.
- Incubation:** The incubation period for enteroviruses is usually between 3 and 7 days from the time of infection until the development of symptoms.
- Contagious Period:** The virus can be spread to someone else beginning about 3 days after infection until about 10 days after development of symptoms.
- Precautions:** Hand washing is the single most effective method of preventing infectious diseases.
- Reportable:** By the provider or laboratory to the local or state health department.

Diagnosis and**Treatment:**

Viral meningitis is usually diagnosed by laboratory tests of spinal fluid obtained with a spinal tap. The specific cause of viral meningitis can be determined by tests that identify the virus in specimens collected from the patient, but these tests are rarely done.

No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients completely recover without treatment. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.