

Viral Meningitis FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580
Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 442-9371 Fax (202) 442-8060
www.doh.dc.gov

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) that can be caused by several different types of viruses. It is a serious but rarely fatal illness for individuals with normal immune systems. Almost all cases occur as single, isolated events. Outbreaks are rare.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis, but it occurs more often in children. The illness is more common in the summer and early fall.

Which viruses cause this form of meningitis?

Approximately half of the cases in the United States are due to common entero (intestinal) viruses. Occasionally, children will have viral meningitis associated with mumps or herpes virus infection. Mosquito-borne viruses also account for a few cases each year.

How are the viruses that cause viral meningitis spread?

Because a number of different viruses are capable of causing viral meningitis, the manner in which the virus is spread depends upon the type of virus involved. Some are spread by person-to-person contact such as direct contact with an infected person's respiratory secretions or by shaking their hands then touching your nose or mouth. Insects may also spread a virus to others but this occurs less frequently.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms may include fever, severe headache, stiff neck, bright lights hurt the eyes, drowsiness or confusion, nausea and vomiting, respiratory symptoms, and fatigue. Symptoms last 7 to 10 days.



The symptoms are similar to bacterial meningitis, a very serious illness. Therefore, if you believe you or your child has meningitis, see your doctor as soon as possible.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear within one week of exposure.

Is a person with viral meningitis contagious?

Some of the enteroviruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious, while others, such as mosquito-borne viruses cannot be spread from person to person. Fortunately, most people exposed to these viruses experience mild symptoms or none at all. Most people are exposed to these viruses at some time in their lives, but few actually develop meningitis.

Should a person with viral meningitis be isolated?

Strict isolation is not necessary. Since most cases are due to enteroviruses that may be passed in the stool, people diagnosed with viral meningitis should be instructed to thoroughly wash their hands after using the toilet.

How is viral meningitis treated?

Antibiotics are not used to treat viral meningitis. Most patients with viral meningitis, caused by enteroviruses, recover on their own. Your doctor may recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache. You can reduce your chance of becoming ill if you practice good personal hygiene. Wash your hands frequently, but especially before preparing food or drink or after using the toilet. Wash articles that have been in contact with an ill person with hot soapy water and a mild bleach solution can be used.

For more information on this topic:

Information about viral meningitis and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-9371.