

Viral meningitis Information Sheet

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What is it?

Meningitis, pronounced men-in-jy-tis, is when the lining around your brain and spinal cord becomes infected. A number of common viruses, such as the measles virus and flu virus, can cause viral meningitis. Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis. Meningitis can also be caused by bacteria.

You must see a doctor right away if you think you or your child might have meningitis. A doctor can work out if you have meningitis, the type of meningitis, and the best treatment - which can save your life.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms usually start around one week after exposure to a virus. Symptoms may start very suddenly. Common symptoms in babies include:

- Fever
- Irritability
- Not wanting to eat
- Sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep

Common symptoms in adults include:

- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Sensitivity to bright light
- Sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy (a lack of energy)

How serious is it?

Most people with viral meningitis get better on their own within 7-10 days. However the first symptoms of viral meningitis are similar to those of bacterial meningitis (which is a more serious illness). It is very important to see a doctor right away if you think you or your child might have meningitis.

Who is most at risk?

You can get viral meningitis at any age. However, some people have a higher risk of getting meningitis, including:

- children younger than 5 years old
- people with weakened immune systems caused by diseases, medications (such as chemotherapy), and recent organ or bone marrow transplants.

Babies younger than 1 month old and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to get very sick.

How could I get infected?

If you have close contact with a person who has viral meningitis, you may get the virus. Only a small number of people infected with the virus will develop viral meningitis. The virus is present in the faeces (poos), mucous and saliva of infected people, and is transmitted through contact with an infected person or by touching any surface which has the virus on it.

How do I protect myself and others?

You can lower your chances of getting infected with any virus or spreading viruses to other people by:

- washing your hands often with soap and water, especially after changing nappies,

using the toilet, or coughing or blowing your nose

- not touching your face with unwashed hands
- stopping close contact such as kissing, hugging, or sharing cups or eating utensils with people who are sick
- covering your coughs and sneezes with a tissue
- cleaning and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as toys and doorknobs, especially if someone is sick
- staying home when you are sick

Immunizations protect against some of the viruses that can cause viral meningitis, such as measles, mumps, chicken pox and flu. Make sure you and your children are up to date with immunizations.

Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?

Do not go to work or send your children to school or preschool when you or they are sick. This increases the chances of spreading illness to those around you.

Resting at home will help you to get better. Stay at home at least 24 hours after you feel well and have no symptoms.

How is it treated?

In most cases, there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. However, meningitis caused by certain viruses such as the herpes virus and the flu virus may need antiviral medicine.

Bed rest, plenty of water or other fluids and medicine to help your fever and headache are recommended.

Antibiotics do not help viral infections, so they are not useful in the treatment of viral meningitis. However, antibiotics do fight bacteria, so they are very important when treating bacterial meningitis.

People who are very unwell, or are at risk of becoming very unwell, such as babies, and people with weakened immune systems may need to spend time in hospital.

Where can I get further information?

For further information on viral meningitis please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.