

## VIRAL MENINGITIS

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (the covering of the brain and spinal cord) that is caused by a virus. Viral meningitis is often less severe than bacterial meningitis and usually resolves without specific treatment. But it can be severe or fatal depending on the virus causing the infection, the person's age, or whether a person has a weakened immune system.

### CAUSE

Most viral meningitis cases in the United States, especially during the summer months, are caused by enteroviruses; however, only a small number of people with enterovirus infections actually develop meningitis.

Other viral infections that can lead to meningitis include

- Mumps
- Herpes virus, including Epstein-Barr virus, herpes simplex viruses, and varicella-zoster virus (which also causes chicken pox and shingles)
- Measles
- Influenza
- Viruses spread through mosquitoes and other insects (arboviruses)

### SYMPTOMS

Meningitis infection is characterized by a sudden onset of fever, headache, and stiff neck. It is often accompanied by other symptoms, such as

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Photophobia (sensitivity to light)
- Altered mental status

### SPREAD

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread from person to person through fecal contamination (which can occur when changing a diaper or using the toilet and not properly washing hands afterwards). Enteroviruses can also be spread through respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. Other viruses, such as mumps and varicella-zoster virus, may also be spread through direct or indirect contact with saliva, sputum, or mucus of an infected person.

### INCUBATION

3 to 6 days for enterovirus; varies for other viruses

### CONTAGIOUS PERIOD

For enterovirus: feces are contaminated for several weeks after illness and respiratory secretions are contaminated for up to a week after illness.

### EXCLUSION

Child care and School: Yes, until the patient is cleared to return by a healthcare provider.

### DIAGNOSIS

The specific causes of meningitis may be determined by tests used to identify the virus in samples collected from the patient.

### **TREATMENT**

Usually there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis, but in some instances specific treatment is available depending on the virus (such as herpes virus). Antibiotics do not help viral infections, so they are not useful in the treatment of viral meningitis. Most patients completely recover on their own within 7 to 10 days. A hospital stay may be necessary in more severe cases or for people with weak immune systems.

### **PREVENTION/CONTROL**

- Wash your hands thoroughly and often, especially after changing diapers, using the toilet, or coughing or blowing your nose.
- Cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing or cough/sneeze into your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues.
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces at least daily, and when soiled.
- Avoid kissing or sharing cups or eating utensils with sick people; avoid sharing with others when you are sick.
- Make sure you and your child are vaccinated on schedule. Vaccinations included in the childhood vaccination schedule can protect children against some diseases that can lead to viral meningitis. These include vaccines against measles and mumps (MMR vaccine) and chickenpox (varicella-zoster vaccine).

For additional information contact Contra Costa Public Health at (925) 313-6740 or check our website at <http://cchealth.org/cd/> or <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html>