



Viral Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the meninges (the three membranes that cover the brain and the spinal cord). These membranes extend from the head down the spinal column from the neck to the base of the spine. A crystal clear fluid called spinal fluid circulates over the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis is sometimes referred to as spinal meningitis.

What is meningitis?

Meningitis may be caused by a virus, bacteria, or fungi. Viral meningitis (also called aseptic meningitis) is the most common type of meningitis. Viral meningitis can also be a complication of mumps, chickenpox, or some other viral disease.

How is meningitis spread?

Some viruses that cause viral meningitis, enteroviruses, are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory and throat secretions from an infected person. You might shake hands with someone infected or touch something infected with the virus and then rub your own nose or mouth. These viruses may also be spread to others by contact with feces, especially among small children who are not toilet trained and to adults who change diapers of infected infants.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- High fever
- Sudden, severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Nausea and vomiting
- Confusion
- Discomfort when looking into bright lights

In newborns and babies, the typical symptoms may be much harder to detect. The parent or caregiver may notice the baby moving more slowly or being inactive, being irritable, vomiting or feeding poorly. Symptoms usually begin within three to ten days after exposure to the virus.

Illness usually lasts less than ten days. See your health care provider immediately if you think you have meningitis.



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How is meningitis treated?

People usually recover without specific treatment. Bed rest, fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache may help a person with viral meningitis feel better. Viral meningitis is not treated with antibiotics.

How can meningitis infection be prevented?

Proper hand washing with soap and warm water helps prevent infection. Hands should be washed:

- After using the toilet
- After changing diapers
- After sneezing or coughing
- Before handling food or drink
- Before eating

Avoid sharing items that may have another person's saliva on them, such as eating utensils, cups or drinking containers and cigarettes. In settings such as childcare centers, washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (1½ cups of household bleach mixed with one gallon of water) can be an effective way to kill the virus.

For more information, call the Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health at 336-641-7777 or visit GuilfordCountyNC.Gov/HealthyGuilford.

Free language assistance available upon request.