



VIRAL MENINGITIS (Nonbacterial Meningitis, Aseptic Meningitis)

What is VIRAL MENINGITIS?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) by any one of a number of different viruses. It is a fairly common disease. Almost all of the cases occur as single, isolated events. Outbreaks are rare. Anyone can get viral meningitis but it occurs most often in children. This type of meningitis should not be confused with the more serious form of Meningococcal meningitis which requires prompt public health intervention to identify and assure treatment of close contacts at risk for contracting the disease.

What causes viral 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. Most people who are infected with enteroviruses either have no symptoms or only get a fever, cold, rash or mouth sores. Only a small number of people with enterovirus infections go on to develop meningitis.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms may include fever, headache, stiff neck and fatigue. Rash, sore throat and intestinal symptoms may also occur. Symptoms generally appear within one week of exposure. Symptoms common in infants include fever, irritability and poor feeding.

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. Most cases are due to enteroviruses that may be passed in the stool. The virus is spread from person to person through contact with materials contaminated with stool. Enteroviruses can also spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat.

Is a person with viral meningitis contagious?

Some of the enteroviruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious. Others, such as mosquito-borne viruses, cannot be spread from person to person. Fortunately, most people exposed to these viruses experience mild or no symptoms. Most people are exposed to these viruses at some time in their lives, but few actually develop meningitis. The Delaware Division of Public Health does not recommend schools, daycares or employers to send a letter home regarding a case in their facility.

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?

There are no specific medicines or antibiotics used to treat viral meningitis. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.