



## MENINGITIS (Viral and Bacterial)

### What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the brain and spinal cord. A bacterial or viral infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord usually causes the swelling. Injuries, cancer, certain drugs, and other types of infections also can cause meningitis. Anyone with symptoms of meningitis should be seen quickly because any type of meningitis can be serious or even fatal.

### Who gets meningitis?

- **Bacterial:** Anyone can get bacterial meningitis. Certain risk factors increase a person's risk for getting bacterial meningitis such as age (babies), group settings, having certain medical conditions, working with pathogens that cause meningitis, and traveling to certain places like sub-Saharan Africa and Saudi Arabia.
- **Viral:** People of any age can get viral meningitis. However, certain groups are at higher risk of getting viral meningitis — children younger than 5 years and people with weakened immune systems caused by diseases, medications that suppress the immune systems, and recent organ or bone marrow transplants.

### How is meningitis spread?

- **Bacterial:** Certain germs that cause bacterial meningitis can spread through food, from mother to baby, and by contacting infected respiratory secretions or droplets.
- **Viral:** Close contact of someone with viral meningitis can become infected with the virus that made that person sick. However, this does not mean the close contact will develop meningitis. Only a small number of people who get infected with the viruses that cause viral meningitis will develop viral meningitis.

### What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis include fever, headache, stiff neck, photophobia, lethargy, altered mental status, vomiting, and nausea. Common symptoms in babies are fever, irritability, poor eating, sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep, and lethargy.

### How soon do symptoms appear?

Typically, symptoms of bacterial meningitis develop within three to seven days after exposure.



## **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

Depending on the pathogen that caused meningitis, the diagnosed person may need to be excluded from work or school. Call the Division of Public Health at the number at the bottom of the page for further guidance.

## **What is the treatment for meningitis?**

- **Bacterial:** Doctors treat bacterial meningitis with several antibiotics.
- **Viral:** In most cases, there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most people who get mild meningitis usually recover completely in seven to 10 days without treatment. Antiviral medicine may help people with meningitis caused by viruses such as influenza and herpes viruses.

## **What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of meningitis?**

- **Bacterial:** Vaccines are the most effective way to prevent certain types of bacterial meningitis such as the meningococcal vaccines, pneumococcal vaccines, and *Haemophilus influenzae* serotype b (Hib) vaccine.
- **Viral:** There are no vaccines available in the United States to protect from non-polio enteroviruses which are the most common cause of viral meningitis. However, vaccines for measles, mumps, chickenpox, and influenza are available and recommended because they protect against viruses that can lead to viral meningitis.

Other ways to protect yourself and the community from viral disease are:

- Avoid bites from mosquitoes and other insects that carry disease that can infect humans.
- Control mice and rats around the home because they carry disease that can infect humans.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.
- Stay home when you are sick and keep sick children out of school.

## **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html>

**Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology**  
**24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156**

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