Viral Meningitis Fact Sheet

Meningitis is an infection of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord

Meningitis can be caused by many different germs including bacteria, viruses, and fungi. Viral meningitis (also called aseptic meningitis) is the most common type of infectious meningitis. Viral meningitis can also be a complication of mumps, chickenpox, or other viral diseases. Viral meningitis is seen most often in children and young adults, but anyone can get viral meningitis.

The viruses that cause meningitis are often spread from person to person

Most cases of viral meningitis are caused by viruses called "enteroviruses." These viruses can be spread by direct contact with saliva or mucus of an infected person. The virus is frequently spread to others by contact with feces, especially among small children who are not toilet trained and to adults who change diapers of an infected infant. The virus is present in the feces of an infected person for weeks.

Symptoms of meningitis may include:

- Sudden headache
- Fever
- Stiff neck
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Confusion
- Eyes sensitive to bright lights

Symptoms in infants may include irritability, refusal to eat, and difficulty waking the baby.
Symptoms usually begin within 3-10 days, after exposure to the virus. Illness usually lasts less than 10 days. People usually recover completely without specific treatment.

No specific antiviral treatment is available

Bed rest, fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache may help a person with viral meningitis feel better.

See your doctor as soon as possible if you think you have meningitis

Your doctor can determine whether the meningitis is due to a virus or bacteria. Meningitis due to bacteria is treated with antibiotics. Meningitis due to viruses is not treated with antibiotics.

Hand washing helps prevent infection. Hands should be washed with soap and water:

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

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