

# Viral Meningitis

## *Information Sheet*

### What is it?

Meningitis is an illness in which there is inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or "aseptic" meningitis, which is the most common type, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. About 90% of cases of viral meningitis are caused by members of a group of viruses known as enteroviruses. Herpes viruses and the mumps virus can also cause viral meningitis.

Viral meningitis is not a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956.

### What is the difference between viral meningitis and meningococcal disease?

Viral meningitis is an illness caused by viruses. Meningococcal disease is caused by the meningococcal bacteria. Both of these organisms cause meningitis, where the lining of the brain and spinal cord become inflamed.

New Zealand has experienced an epidemic of meningococcal disease in recently and some children and young adults have been vaccinated to help prevent the spread of this disease. Vaccination for meningococcal disease will not protect you against viral meningitis.

Often, the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are the same. For this reason, if you think you or your child has meningitis, see your doctor as soon as possible.

### How does a person become infected?

Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (e.g., saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose or mouth.

The virus can also be found in the stool/poo/tutae of persons who are infected. The virus is spread through this route mainly among small children who are not yet toilet trained. It can also be spread this way to adults changing the nappies of an infected infant and then not washing their hands afterwards.

### Can I get viral meningitis if I'm around someone who has it?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis are infectious. Enteroviruses, for example, are very common during the summer and early autumn, and many people are exposed to them. However, most infected persons either have no symptoms or develop only a cold or rash with low-grade fever. Only a small proportion of infected persons

actually develop meningitis. Therefore, if you are around someone who has viral meningitis, you have a moderate chance of becoming infected, but a very small chance of developing meningitis.

## What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

The incubation period for enteroviruses is usually between 3 to 7 days from the time you are infected until you develop symptoms. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after you develop symptoms.

The common symptoms of viral meningitis are fever, severe headache, stiff neck, bright lights hurting the eyes, drowsiness or confusion, nausea and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify. They may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty in awakening the baby, or the baby refuses to eat. Usually the illness lasts from 7 to 10 days.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by tests arranged by a doctor.

No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients completely recover on their own. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

## How bad is it?

Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems. Usually, the patient recovers completely. Bacterial meningitis, on the other hand, can be very serious and result in disability or death if not treated promptly.

## How do I avoid the illness?

As most people who are infected with enteroviruses do not become sick, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. However, having good personal hygiene can help to reduce your chances of becoming infected.

You can decrease your chance of contracting the illness by:

- Always washing and drying your hands thoroughly:
  - After going to the toilet
  - After changing children's nappies
  - After cleaning up faecal 'accidents'
  - After nursing or coming into contact with a patient with viral meningitis
- Thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that have been contaminated with faeces or saliva using a bleach-based household cleaner (following the manufacturers instructions). Wear gloves when cleaning up.
- Flush any faeces away in the toilet and make sure the surrounding area is kept clean.
- Immediately remove and wash contaminated clothing and linen, using hot water and laundry detergent.
- Do not share spit, food, cigarettes, drink containers, or lip balm, etc.

## For further information please contact:



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