

FACT SHEET: VIRAL MENINGITIS

June 2025

WHAT IS VIRAL MENINGITIS?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord that can be caused by several different types of viruses. Viral meningitis is also referred to as aseptic meningitis. Non-polio enteroviruses are the most common cause of viral meningitis in the United States. Other viruses that cause meningitis include mumps, herpesviruses (e.g., Epstein-Barr, herpes simplex viruses, and varicella-zoster), measles, influenza, West Nile virus, and lymphocytic choriomeningitis.

WHO CAN GET VIRAL MENINGITIS?

Viral meningitis can affect individuals of all ages, but certain populations are at a higher risk. These include children under the age of 5 and individuals with compromised immune systems due to diseases, medications (such as chemotherapy), or recent organ or bone marrow transplants. Infants younger than 1 month old and those with weakened immune systems are particularly susceptible to experiencing severe illness.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

The incubation period, the time between first exposure and the development of symptoms, ranges from 4 to 6 weeks.

WHAT ARE THEY SYMPTOMS OF VIRAL MENINGITIS?

The symptoms in infants may include fever, irritability, poor eating, sleepiness or trouble waking up from sleep, and lack of energy. The symptoms in adults may include fever, severe headache, stiff neck, sensitivity of the eyes to bright lights, drowsiness, nausea and vomiting, lack of appetite, and lack of energy. The initial symptoms of viral meningitis are similar to those of bacterial meningitis. However, viral meningitis is often a less severe illness. Therefore, you should see a health care provider as soon as possible to determine if you have the disease and the type of meningitis.

WHAT DO THE VIRUSES THAT CAUSE MENINGITIS SPREAD?

Viral meningitis can spread in different ways, depending on the type of virus causing the illness. If you have close contact with a person who has viral meningitis, you are not likely to develop meningitis even if you become infected with the virus that made the person sick.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE THE SPREAD OF VIRAL MENINGITIS?

You can reduce your chance of getting infected or spreading the virus to other people if you do the following:

1. wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds
2. cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
3. avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands
4. avoid close contact, such as kissing, or sharing cups or eating utensils
5. clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as toys, doorknobs, tables, and counters
6. stay home when sick.

IS THERE A VACCINE FOR VIRAL MENINGITIS?

There are no vaccines to protect against the viruses that most commonly cause viral meningitis (non-polio enteroviruses). Some vaccinations can protect you against diseases such as measles, mumps, chickenpox, and influenza, which can lead to viral meningitis.

IS THERE A VACCINE FOR VIRAL MENINGITIS?

There is no specific treatment. Antibiotics are not used to treat viral infections. Most people with viral meningitis recover on their own within 7-10 days. People with meningitis caused by certain viruses such as herpesvirus and influenza may benefit from treatment with an antiviral medication.

SHOULD A PERSON WITH VIRAL MENINGITIS BE ISOLATED?

Strict isolation is not necessary.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about viral meningitis and other related health topics can be found at [cdc.com](https://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.