



# Meningitis

## **What is meningitis?**

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissues covering the brain and spinal cord (meninges) usually caused by an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis can be caused by a virus, bacteria or in rare circumstances a fungus. It is important to know if meningitis is caused by a virus or bacteria because the severity of the illness and the treatment are different.

Viral meningitis is often less severe and resolves without treatment. Bacterial meningitis can be very severe, requires treatment and may result in complications such as brain damage, hearing loss, loss of limb and learning disabilities.

## **What symptoms should I watch for?**

The symptoms of meningitis are not the same for everyone. Common symptoms for anyone over the age of 2 include high fever, stiff neck and headache. These symptoms may develop suddenly or over a couple of days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion and drowsiness.

In newborns and infants under the age of 2 the symptoms of fever, headache and stiff neck may be absent or difficult to detect. The infant may experience irritability, poor feeding and vomiting.

As the infection progresses, people of any age may experience seizures.

## **How do I know if I have meningitis?**

Meningitis is usually diagnosed by testing your spinal fluid. Identifying the cause of meningitis is important for determining the correct treatment.

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

Not all meningitis types need medicine to get better. Most people with viral meningitis get better on their own, with bed rest, lots of fluids and medicine to relieve fever and headache. With bacterial and fungal meningitis, you may be sick enough to be admitted to hospital. Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of different antibiotics depending on the specific “bug”.

## **How is meningitis spread?**

The transmission can vary depending on the type of meningitis.

For bacterial meningitis, infection can spread from person to person through direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat from the infected person. For example: Coughing, sneezing, kissing and sharing of utensils.

Bacterial meningitis is not as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and is not spread by casual contact or by breathing the same air as someone who is infected.

The viruses that cause viral meningitis most often spread through stool or secretions from the nose or throat of an infected person.

Fungal meningitis is spread by inhaling fungal spores from the environment. It is not contagious.

## **How do I protect myself and others?**

The following are helpful in preventing the spread of any illness:

- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing and/or sneezing.
- Do not drink from the same glass, water bottle, cup, straw or pop can as others.
- Do not share cigarettes.
- Wash hands well after coughing or sneezing, going to the washroom and before food preparation. This is important because hand to mouth contact is a common way of spreading many infections.

For more information call the Communicable Disease Team: ext. 8809



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In addition, it is recommended that you keep your immunization current for:

- Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR)
- Varicella (chickenpox)
- Meningococcal (*Neisseria meningitidis*)
- Pneumococcal (*Streptococcus pneumoniae*)
- *Haemophilus influenzae* type B

***Is there anything special I need to know about meningitis?***

If you have meningitis, you may be contacted by your local public health unit for follow-up.

For some types of bacterial meningitis, close contacts of someone with meningitis may be recommended preventative treatment. If it is determined that you have been in contact with someone who has bacterial meningitis and you require preventative antibiotics, public health will notify you to discuss treatment.

It is recommended that you seek medical attention if symptoms of meningitis develop.