

Meningitis

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of spinal cord fluid and the fluid around the brain. The infection is caused by a virus or bacteria.

- **Viral meningitis** is the most common type of meningitis. The length of time from exposure to development of symptoms depends on the type of virus causing infection. People usually get better without treatment within 7 to 10 days.

Many different types of viruses can cause meningitis. Most cases of viral meningitis are caused by a group of viruses known as enteroviruses. The viruses that cause herpes and mumps can also lead to meningitis. Viral meningitis is not as severe as bacterial meningitis.

- **Bacterial meningitis** can cause brain damage, hearing loss, learning disability or death without quick treatment. Symptoms may appear quickly or over several days. In general, symptoms start about 3 to 7 days after exposure. Later, symptoms can be serious, including seizures and coma.

It is important to find out what kind of bacteria caused the meningitis because antibiotics (medicines) can make you well and prevent the spreading of the bacteria to others.

The two main causes of bacterial meningitis are *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis*.

Who Can Get Meningitis?

Anyone can get meningitis. People most at risk include infants, college students, people who have weakened immune systems (such as caused by HIV, chemotherapy or a recent transplant), or children younger than 5 years old.

How is Meningitis Spread?

Meningitis can be spread.

■ Viral:

- by having long-term contact with an infected person or roommate
- by having contact with an infected person's saliva, sputum, stool or nasal mucus
- by touching your nose, mouth or eyes after shaking hands with or touching something handled by an infected person who has just sneezed, coughed or blown their nose

■ Bacterial:

- by having contact with an infected person's saliva, sputum or nasal mucus
- by being kissed, coughed or sneezed on by an infected person.

Meningitis cannot be spread through casual contact or by breathing the air where an infected person has been.

What are the Symptoms of Meningitis?

Symptoms in people older than age 2 include:

- high fever
- headache, stiff neck
- nausea, vomiting
- confusion, sleepiness
- sensitivity to light.

Symptoms can develop from several hours to 2 days.

Newborns and small infants may:

- appear slow and inactive
- be irritable
- vomit
- feed poorly.

How is Meningitis Found?

If you have symptoms of meningitis it is important to get to a health care provider right away. They will take a sample of your spinal fluid through a spinal tap. During a spinal tap, a needle is inserted into your lower back.

By testing the spinal fluid, the health care provider will be able to tell if the cause is viral or bacterial. They will be able to identify the strain of bacteria.

How is Meningitis Treated?

If meningitis is caused by a virus, no treatment is needed. The virus must run its course.

If meningitis is caused by bacteria, your health care provider will give you a prescription for an antibiotic. Take the medicine as directed. Do not stop taking it even if you feel better. If you stop taking the antibiotic, the bacteria will not be killed.

What are the Possible Side Effects of Meningitis?

People who have bacterial meningitis are at risk for brain damage, hearing loss or learning disability.

What Prevents the Spread of the Germ?

To prevent the spread of the meningitis bacteria:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds every time after using the bathroom, changing a diaper, blowing your nose, or before preparing food.
- Practice good hygiene. Don't share drinks, straws, foods, eating utensils, lip balms or toothbrushes with anyone else.
- Stay healthy. Maintain your immune system by getting enough rest, getting regular exercise, and eating healthful foods.
- Teach your children how to wash their hands or help them if they cannot do it themselves.
- Cover your mouth or nose when you cough or sneeze. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. This includes touching and shaking hands.
- Talk with your health care provider about vaccines against some strains of bacterial meningitis.

How Long Should Infected People Stay Home From Work or School?

You should not be able to spread the disease 24 hours after starting antibiotics (for bacterial meningitis) and when symptoms are gone (for viral meningitis).

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.