

Meningitis - viral/aseptic

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Meningitis is a disease that occurs when the membranes around the brain and spinal cord (meninges) become inflamed. There are several types of meningitis. The bacterial form is more serious than the viral form described below. Viral meningitis is more common and is rarely fatal.

The Disease

Viral meningitis (sometimes called aseptic meningitis) is usually caused by a group of viruses called non polio enteroviruses. It can also be caused by arboviruses (such as West Nile Virus), herpes virus, and – more rarely – influenza, mumps, measles or HIV. Lymphocytic choriomeningitis is a type of viral meningitis spread by rodents.

Transmission

These viruses are found in the respiratory secretions (saliva, mucus) of an infected person. A healthy person can pick up the virus in several ways, including direct contact with the secretions or by touching a contaminated object. If a healthy person gets the virus on their hands, they may introduce the virus into their body by touching their eyes, nose or mouth. Enteroviruses are also present in an infected person's faeces, and may spread among children or their caregivers in this way.

The disease can be serious, but it rarely kills patients with healthy immune systems. Children less than five years of age and those with weak immune systems are at higher risk of developing illness. Babies less than one month old and immunocompromised patients are more likely to suffer severe illness.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually develop three to seven days after you are infected, and typically last a week to 10 days. The symptoms of viral meningitis are similar to those of bacterial meningitis and usually include fever, severe headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to light, drowsiness or confusion, and nausea and vomiting. Irritability, rash, or weakness may also occur – the symptoms vary by patient.

It is important to seek immediate medical attention if you suspect you have meningitis, since it is impossible to tell by symptoms alone whether you have the viral or bacterial form. Bacterial meningitis is a serious, sometimes fatal, disease that requires immediate treatment.

Diagnosis

Specific laboratory tests from samples of saliva, stool, blood and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) help diagnose the disease.

Treatment

Most patients completely recover on their own. No specific treatment for viral meningitis is required, so care is directed towards alleviating symptoms. Patients are often advised to rest, drink adequate fluids, and use a pain reliever to reduce headache and lower fever.

Patients with severe infections may require prescription medication to manage their symptoms. Some serious cases require hospitalization.

Prevention

The best way to avoid infection is to practice good personal hygiene, especially if you are around an infected person.

- Wash your hands frequently.
- Hand sanitisers can be used when soap and water aren't readily available.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Keep your distance from people who are obviously sick.
- Clean and disinfect objects that may have been contaminated

Ensure that your routine vaccinations are up to date. Avoid mosquito and other insect bites. Ensure that your surroundings are free of rodents.

Risk to travellers

The disease is present throughout the world. There is no vaccine available to prevent viral meningitis, though there are vaccines against some of the diseases that can cause it (such as measles, mumps).

Reference

International SOS - Country Guides
<http://www.internationalsos.com>

More information

CDC Viral Meningitis Information
<http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html>

Disclaimer

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