



# Viral Meningitis

**Consult the health department before posting or distributing the Parent/Guardian fact sheet.**

Meningitis is inflammation of the tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis can be caused by a number of different viruses and occurs most often in children. Almost all cases occur as single, isolated events.

## School health and childcare provider information

### Cause

Enteroviruses cause most cases of viral meningitis in the United States. Illnesses caused by enteroviruses (e.g., coxsackie viruses, echoviruses) usually occur in the summer and early fall. Occasionally, viral meningitis is also associated with measles, chickenpox, mumps, or herpes virus infections. Arboviruses (e.g., West Nile Virus), which are carried by mosquitoes, typically cause encephalitis, but can also cause viral meningitis.

### Symptoms

Sudden onset of fever, headache, stiff neck, fatigue, and rash. Sore throat, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea may also occur. In infants, symptoms are harder to identify. They may include fever, fussiness, irritability, difficulty waking, or refusing to eat. Most mild cases resolve in 7 to 10 days.

### Spread

Varies by virus. For enteroviruses, the virus leaves the body through the stool of an infected person and enters another person when hands, food, or objects (such as toys) contaminated with stool are placed in the mouth. Also, may be infected when a person with enterovirus coughs, sneezes, or vomits tiny droplets into the air, and another person breathes them in. Contact with an infected person may increase your chance of becoming infected with the virus, but the risk of developing meningitis as a complication of the illness is small.

### Incubation

Usually within one week from the time a person is exposed until symptoms appear, but could range from 2 to 21 days, depending on the virus. Enteroviruses, for example, take 1 to 10 days, usually less than 4 days.

### Contagious period

Varies among the viruses. For enteroviruses, shedding from the respiratory tract usually lasts 1 to 3 weeks. Individuals may shed virus in the stool for 2-8 weeks.

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### Exclusion

Childcare: Until the fever is gone and diarrhea/vomiting has stopped and the child is well enough to participate.

School: None, if the child is well enough to participate in routine activities.

### Diagnosis

Often the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis (meningococcal disease) are similar. While viral meningitis is rarely fatal, bacterial meningitis can be very serious and result in disability or death if not treated promptly. A health care provider will make the diagnosis based on clinical symptoms or may perform lab tests.

### Treatment

Recommend parents/guardians call their health care provider. Antiviral medication may help some cases of meningitis. Hospitalization may be required for cases who develop severe illness.

### Prevention

- Cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing and sneezing or cough/sneeze into your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues in the trash.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after using the toilet, changing diapers, touching nasal secretions, and before preparing or eating food. **Thorough handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.**
- Clean and disinfect diapering area and potty chairs after each use. Clean and disinfect bathroom toilets, sinks, and toys at least daily and when soiled (see Section 2).
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces at least daily and when soiled (see Section 2).
- Do not allow sharing of eating utensils and drinking containers (e.g., forks, spoons, cups, glasses, etc.). Encourage children to have their own water bottles.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 543-5230 or call your local health department.

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