



Patient education: Viral meningitis (The Basics)

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What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a condition that can cause a fever, headache, and stiff neck. Meningitis happens when the lining that covers the brain and spinal cord (called the "meninges") gets inflamed or infected. This can happen after a person has an infection in another part of the body. The germs can travel through the blood to the lining of the brain and spinal cord.

Are there different kinds of meningitis?

Yes. Meningitis is most often caused by a germ. There are 2 main types of meningitis caused by germs:

- Viral meningitis, which is caused by viruses
- Bacterial meningitis, which is caused by bacteria

This article is about **viral meningitis**. But it's important to know that both viral and bacterial meningitis can have the same symptoms. A doctor has to do tests to know which type of meningitis a person has.

It is important that doctors figure out what kind of meningitis a person has. That's because bacterial meningitis is a medical emergency. If it is not treated, it can lead to brain problems or even death. Viral meningitis is serious, but not usually as serious as bacterial meningitis. Most people with viral meningitis recover within 1 to 2 weeks without any long-term problems.

Doctors sometimes use the term "aseptic meningitis" to mean meningitis **other** than bacterial meningitis. This most often means viral meningitis, but there are other, less common types, too. These include meningitis from other germs (for example, the germ that causes Lyme disease) and from other causes, such as certain medicines or cancers.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Common symptoms include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck – This is most often seen in adults and children. Babies might not get a stiff neck.
- Nausea or vomiting
- Having light bother a person's eyes

Babies can also have other symptoms, including:

- Not feeding well
- Being more sleepy or fussy than usual
- A bulging soft spot on the skull

People can have other symptoms, too, depending on the virus that's causing the infection. These can include diarrhea, runny nose, sore throat, muscle aches, cough, or a rash. A rash can also happen with bacterial meningitis.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. If you have a fever, headache, and stiff neck, go to the emergency department right away. If you think that your child has meningitis, bring them to the emergency department right away.

The doctor has to do tests in the hospital to figure out what kind of meningitis you or your child has. Because bacterial meningitis can be life-threatening, it's very important to go to the hospital as soon as you notice symptoms.

Will I have tests?

Yes. Your doctor or nurse will learn about your symptoms and do an exam. They will do tests to find out if you have meningitis and which virus is causing it. The tests can include:

- Blood tests
- Lumbar puncture (sometimes called a "spinal tap") – During this procedure, a doctor puts a thin needle into the lower back and removes a small amount of spinal fluid. Spinal fluid is

the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. They will do lab tests on the spinal fluid.

- CT scan of the brain – This is an imaging test that creates pictures of the brain. Not everyone with meningitis needs to have this test. Your doctor will tell you if you need a CT scan.
 - Other tests – For example, the doctor can use a swab to collect a sample from the back of the throat or nose. Then, they can do lab tests on the sample.
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How is viral meningitis treated?

Treatment usually includes:

- Resting
- Drinking fluids, or getting fluids into a vein through a tube called an "IV"
- Taking an over-the-counter medicine to treat a fever or headache

Viral meningitis is **not** treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics treat bacterial infections, not viral infections. Because it can be hard to tell whether meningitis is viral or bacterial, your doctor might give you antibiotics until your final test results come back.

Your doctor might recommend other treatment, depending on the virus that's causing the infection. Some viruses can be treated with "antiviral" medicines.

Can viral meningitis be spread from person to person?

Yes. But even if you catch the virus, it doesn't usually lead to meningitis.

Can viral meningitis be prevented?

To help lower the chance of getting viral meningitis, you can:

- Make sure that you and your children get the vaccines your doctor recommends. Vaccines can prevent certain serious or deadly infections.
- Wash your hands often, especially after you change a diaper or use the bathroom, and before you eat ([figure 1](#)).
- Avoid sharing cups or silverware, especially with people who are sick.

- Avoid getting bitten by mosquitoes. Some mosquitoes carry viruses that can infect you and lead to meningitis.

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GRAPHICS

How to wash your hands



Wet your hands with clean water, and apply a small amount of soap. Lather and rub hands together for at least 20 seconds. Clean your wrists, palms, backs of your hands, between your fingers, tips of your fingers, thumbs, and under and around your nails. Rinse well, and dry your hands using a clean towel.

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