

Fact Sheet: Viral Meningitis

What is Viral Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis may be caused by bacteria or viruses. Viral meningitis is more common, less serious, and usually causes fewer long-lasting problems than the bacterial form. Many different viruses may cause viral meningitis.

What are the symptoms?

- Severe headache
- Stiff neck and back
- Vomiting
- Sudden fever
- Irritability
- Sometimes a rash
- Intolerance of bright light
- Drowsiness or confusion

Symptoms usually occur 3-7 days after exposure and may last 7-10 days.

In infants the symptoms are more difficult to identify and may include: fever, irritability, difficulty awakening the baby, or the baby refusing to eat.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

How is it spread?

Viral meningitis is caused by a number of different viruses, many of which are passed to others through coughing and sneezing. Some viruses are transmitted by the fecal-oral route, which means you put something in your mouth that is contaminated with feces from an infected person. Some viruses, such as West Nile, can infect people through insects like mosquitoes. Viral meningitis can also be a complication of common viral infections like chickenpox or some diarrheal illnesses.

How is it treated?

Since antibiotics are not effective against viruses, there is no specific therapy for viral meningitis. Because viral meningitis is rarely serious, it can often be managed on an outpatient basis. Your health care provider may recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids and medicine to relieve the fever and headache.

How is it prevented?

- Practice good hygiene and always wash your hands after going to the toilet and before preparing food.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when you sneeze or cough. Cough or sneeze in your sleeve if tissues are not available.
- Avoid sharing eating utensils or other objects like pop bottles and drinking glasses.
- Have your children immunized against measles, mumps, rubella, varicella, and polio. These diseases can cause meningitis.
- Wash contaminated surfaces with soap and water. Wipe down after cleaning with a solution of one part bleach to ten parts water.

