



VIRAL (ASEPTIC) MENINGITIS

What is aseptic (viral) meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It is an infection usually caused by a virus, bacteria or fungus. Viral meningitis (or aseptic meningitis), is caused by one of several types of viruses. During the summer and fall, most cases of viral meningitis are caused by a group of gastrointestinal or respiratory viruses known as enteroviruses. Most cases of viral meningitis are isolated and not related to outbreaks. The herpes and the mumps virus may also cause meningitis, as well as exposure to infected insects, such as mosquitoes.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis vary from person to person. Some individuals may have no symptoms; others may have mild symptoms such as cough, runny nose, rash or low-grade temperature. Common symptoms are headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to light, tiredness, confusion, nausea, vomiting and fever. In babies, symptoms may include fever, fretfulness or irritability, difficulty in awakening or lethargy, and refusing to eat.

Although viral meningitis can be serious, most people completely recover within 7 to 10 days. Meningitis caused by bacteria can be very serious and have life-threatening complications. Unfortunately, the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are the same. Therefore, prompt medical attention is required when a person develops any signs or symptoms of meningitis.

How is the virus spread?

Viruses are often spread through direct contact with saliva, sputum, or nasal discharge of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose, mouth or eyes. The virus can also be found in the stool of persons who are infected. Spread of viruses is especially common in younger children who have not developed good handwashing skills. The time from exposure to the virus to start of symptoms is generally between 3 and 7 days. A person is infectious, or able to spread the virus, from about 3 days after exposure until 10 days after start of symptoms.

How is viral meningitis treated?

Viral meningitis is generally diagnosed by laboratory examination of an ill person's spinal fluid. The absence of bacteria in the fluid indicates the cause of illness is most likely viral. There is no specific treatment, vaccine or preventative medication for viral meningitis. Doctors generally recommend good nutrition, rest, plenty of fluids, and over-the-counter medicine to reduce fever and any body discomfort.

How can the spread of the virus be prevented?

Frequent hand washing, covering a cough or sneeze, disposal of soiled tissues, and appropriate cleaning of environmental surfaces are essential keys to the prevention and control of all illnesses.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SCPH Communicable Disease Unit 330-375-2662
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov
Mayo Clinic www.mayoclinic.com
Minnesota Department of Health www.health.state.mn.us