

Meningitis

FACT SHEET

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid around the spinal cord and the brain. It is usually caused by either a virus or bacteria. Viral meningitis is usually less severe and usually goes away without specific treatment. Bacterial meningitis can be very severe and can lead to hearing loss, learning disabilities or brain damage.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

The most common symptoms of meningitis are a high fever, headache and stiff neck. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or in 1 to 2 days.

Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, confusion, sleepiness and bright lights hurting your eyes.

Newborns and infants may not have the high fever, headache or stiff neck. They may just be slow or inactive, have vomiting or a loss of appetite or be irritable.

How does a person get meningitis?

Meningitis is spread through saliva or respiratory droplets. For example, when you kiss someone who is infected, share a drink with them or if they cough droplets on you. It is not as contagious as a cold. You can't get it just from breathing the air around them.

Can meningitis be treated?

Viral meningitis usually goes away without specific treatment.

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics, but treatment needs to begin early. It is important to know which bacteria are causing the illness so the most effective antibiotic can be used for treatment. When appropriate treatment is used, the risk of dying from meningitis drops to below 15%, except for senior adults.

How can I protect myself against meningitis?

Children are routinely vaccinated against four types of meningitis with the MCV4 vaccine. Teens who have not been vaccinated should be vaccinated before entering high school.

The following people are at increased risk of getting meningitis and should also consider being vaccinated:

- College freshmen living in dormitories,
- People with immune system disorders,
- People with spleen conditions,
- Anyone traveling to a country experiencing a meningitis outbreak, and
- People who have been exposed to meningitis.

You can also protect yourself by washing your hands frequently with soap and water. Sanitize common surfaces like telephones, doorknobs and faucets. Avoid sharing personal items such as a toothbrush, drinking glass and eating utensils.
