

# Viral Meningitis

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## What is viral meningitis?

Meningitis is an illness characterized by inflammation of the tissues and fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Many different viruses can cause meningitis; the most common are called enteroviruses. Viral meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in people with healthy immune systems. Most people who get viral meningitis will fully recover without any problems.

## How do I get viral meningitis?

Enteroviruses and other viruses that cause meningitis are spread through the saliva, nasal secretions, or feces of infected persons. You can become infected through direct contact with an infected person's stool (e.g., by changing the diapers of an infected person). You can also become infected through direct or indirect contact with the respiratory secretions of an infected person (e.g., breathing in droplets from a cough or sneeze, kissing or shaking hands with an infected person, or touching something an infected person has handled and then rubbing your own nose or mouth). Some of these viruses can live on surfaces, such as door knobs or on toys. Some types of viral meningitis can also be transmitted through mosquito bites.

## Symptoms

Most people who are infected with enteroviruses either have no symptoms or only get a cold, rash or mouth sores with low-grade fever. Only a small number of people with enterovirus infections develop meningitis. Some of the most common symptoms of viral meningitis include:

- Fever
- Stiff neck
- Nausea and vomiting
- Severe headache
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Rash (sometimes)

## How long is an infected person contagious (able to spread the disease)?

An infected person can spread the virus for one to two weeks. Some infected people may not have noticeable symptoms and still be able to spread the virus without ever knowing they are sick. Contact with an infected person may increase your chance of becoming infected with the virus that made them sick; however, there is only a small chance that you will develop meningitis as a complication of the illness. Most people infected with these viruses will not develop meningitis.

## Prevention

- Wash hands often, especially after using the restroom, after sneezing, coughing or blowing your nose and before handling food.
- Always cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Sanitize baby toys and other objects young children might put in their mouths with one tablespoon bleach per gallon of water. Let objects soak for two minutes, rinse and air dry.
- Avoid mosquito bites by using insect repellent containing DEET and wearing long sleeves and pants while outside.

## Treatment of viral meningitis

There is no treatment for viral meningitis at this time. Most people will fully recover in about a week. However, if symptoms are severe, it is important to see your health care provider. Antibiotics are not effective against viral meningitis, but your health care provider can provide supportive care such as pain medication and fluid therapy.

