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Viral (Aseptic) Meningitis

What is viral (aseptic) meningitis?

Meningitis is an illness that causes swelling in the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or aseptic meningitis is the most common type of meningitis and is caused from an infection by one of several types of viruses. Viral meningitis should not be confused with a more serious bacterial infection called meningococcal disease, which causes bacterial meningitis.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Viral meningitis is rarely fatal in persons who are otherwise healthy. The symptoms of viral meningitis may not be the same for every person. The more common symptoms are fever, severe headache, stiff neck, intolerance to bright lights, drowsiness or confusion, a rash and nausea and vomiting. In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify. They may include fever or irritability. The baby may also refuse to eat or it may be difficult to awaken the baby. Usually the symptoms do not last more than 10 days; most people recover completely. It is important to see your doctor as soon as possible (if you think you've been exposed to an infected person) because the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are often the same.

Is it contagious?

This can vary depending on the type of virus that is causing the infection. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning around 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after you develop symptoms. Viral meningitis is most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something that they have touched, and then rubbing your own nose or mouth. The virus can also be found in the stool of persons who are infected. Infected children who are not yet toilet trained can spread the virus to adults.

What is recommended?

- It can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus because most persons who are infected do not become sick.
- If you are in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, the most effective method to protect yourself is to wash your hands well and often.
- Childcare centres can wash toys, objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution in order to help stop the spread of the virus.
- No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients recover completely on their own, and doctors will often recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

For more information, please contact Telehealth at 1-866-797-0000

References: Adapted from Chin, James. (2000). Control of Communicable Diseases Manual. 17th Edition, American Public Health Association; Centres for Disease Control and Preparedness web-site, Respiratory and Enteric Viruses Branch, August 20, 2001

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