

Viral meningitis (Aseptic meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is a relatively common illness, but rarely is serious. Meningitis is an infection of the tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord with a virus. Viral meningitis is the most common type of meningitis and is usually caused by a group of viruses called enteroviruses. Other causes of viral meningitis include: measles, chickenpox, mumps, herpes virus, and West Nile virus. Viral meningitis can sometimes be confused with bacterial meningitis, which is much more serious. Increases in cases of viral meningitis occur regularly in the summer and fall and are not cause for alarm. People suspected of having meningitis should be seen by a health care provider.

Signs and symptoms

- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Trouble waking up
- Sensitivity to light
- Confusion
- Nausea/vomiting
- Irritability

Incubation period

Dependent on the virus involved (i.e., incubation for enterovirus is three to seven days).

Contagious period and spread

- Contagious period: Varies by the virus causing the infection, but for viral meningitis caused by enterovirus, shedding of the virus in feces can continue for several weeks. Shedding from the respiratory tract usually lasts a week or less.
- How the infection spreads varies among the viruses that cause viral meningitis. Viral meningitis is most often spread through direct contact with nose/throat discharges or the stool of a person with infection.

Public health reporting requirements

- Individual cases of viral meningitis do not need to be reported to the state or local health department, but some diseases that can cause meningitis, such as chickenpox, mumps, and measles, are reportable.
- Report the infection to the staff member designated by the child care program or school for decision-making and action related to care of ill children. That person will work with public health to alert possibly exposed family and staff members to watch for symptoms.

Control of spread

- Encourage frequent and thorough handwashing.
- Encourage covering of mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Promptly disinfect contaminated surfaces (like eating/drinking utensils) and other commonly touched surfaces (like toys) and doorknobs soiled by secretions. See [Disease Prevention: The Facility Environment](#).
- Consult with local or state public health about control measures.

Treatment

Children and staff with symptoms of viral meningitis should be referred to their health care provider for treatment and to distinguish between viral and bacterial meningitis, which is important in determining if close contacts need additional management.

Exclusion

Exclusion is usually not necessary for viral meningitis. However, meningitis caused by certain viruses, such as chickenpox, mumps, or measles, do require exclusion. See the sections of the guidance related to those viruses for more information.

Role of teachers, caregivers, and family

- In communication with health professionals and parents/guardians/caregivers, distinguish between viral and bacterial meningitis.
- Teach children/students to cover their noses and mouths when sneezing or coughing with a disposable facial tissue or an upper arm sleeve or elbow.
- Practice and encourage good hand-hygiene techniques, especially after coughing or sneezing.