

Viral Meningitis

Fact Sheet

What is Viral Meningitis?

Meningitis is the inflammation of the lining of the spinal cord and brain. Meningitis may be caused by bacteria or by viruses. Viral meningitis is the most common form of meningitis and can be caused by several different types of virus including *enteroviruses* and it is also a complication from the mumps virus and the *varicella-zoster* (chicken pox) virus. Viral meningitis is sometimes called aseptic meningitis because in some cases, it is not possible to identify the microorganism causing the meningitis. Although viral meningitis is a serious disease, it progresses more slowly and is rarely fatal compared to bacterial meningitis.

Symptoms of viral meningitis can be quite non-specific and include headache, mild photophobia (dislike of bright lights), low-grade fever, vomiting, general tiredness, and lethargy and minor neck stiffness. In some cases of viral meningitis, a rash may develop. In babies and young children, these symptoms may be absent and instead, they may have a fever, be irritable, be difficult to wake up and refuse to eat. Treatment for viral meningitis is symptomatic and includes bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medication to reduce fever and headaches. In general, most patients recover spontaneously, with the symptoms of viral meningitis lasting for between 7 to 14 days. Complications of viral meningitis include chronic fatigue syndrome, insomnia, chronic muscle weakness and muscle spasm, however these complications rarely occur.

How did I acquire viral meningitis?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis can be spread from person to person through contact with respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. This can happen as easily as shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose or mouth.

Some of these viruses can also be found in the faecal matter of persons who are infected. The virus can then be spread through contact with infected faecal matter (e.g., by changing the nappy of an infected infant). Often a virus that causes viral meningitis in one person may only cause mild cold or flu like symptoms in another, therefore, you may have come into contact with a person who had a viral infection but only had mild symptoms and was unaware that they were infectious.

Who is at risk from viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis can affect anyone, but those most at risk include:

- Infants and young children
- People who have a poor immune system
- People who have had their spleen removed (splenectomy) or whose spleen does not work properly

How can VRE be spread?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis are generally spread through contact with infectious body fluids or secretions. Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of ALL infections (see below). Good respiratory hygiene practices such as covering the nose and mouth when sneezing / coughing and disposing of used tissues immediately after blowing your nose also reduces the spread of infection.

How will my care change whilst in hospital?

Unless your viral meningitis is known to be caused by the mumps virus or the chicken pox virus, there will be no change to your care in hospital. If either of these viruses is the cause, then the following will occur:

- A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.

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- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as a face mask, gloves, goggles and an apron or gown when they enter your room.
- You will be allocated a private room with your own en-suite facilities. If the cause of the viral meningitis is the chicken pox, then the door to your room must always be kept closed to prevent the spread of the virus into the rest of the ward.
- To prevent further spread of the infection, you are required to remain in your room during the infectious stage. If you are required to have urgent medical tests elsewhere in the hospital, you will be supplied with a special face mask to wear over your nose and mouth, always, when you are outside your room.

Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day. Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection Prevention and Control team.

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled / dirty. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

Can I still have visitors?

Yes – however, to minimise the risk of infection, the nursing staff will provide education to your visitors about the need to wash their hands before and after they enter your room. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to do this. They can use either soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol hand rub provided outside your room.

If your viral meningitis is caused by the mumps virus or the *varicella-zoster* (chickenpox) virus, visitors who **SHOULD NOT** come to see you are those who **HAVE NOT** had or been immunized against mumps or chickenpox, especially children, newborn babies, anyone who may have lowered immunity or is pregnant. If you are unsure about having contact with your family and friends during your infectious stage, please speak to your doctor or ask to speak with the infection control nurse.

Whilst you are infectious, your visitors will be asked to wear a mask to protect them from infection; they may also be required to wear goggles, gloves and an apron as well. The nursing staff will direct your visitors in applying these items and in the correct disposal of them, as well as educate them on the need to perform hand hygiene before entering your room and when they leave your room. We would appreciate it if you would also encourage your visitors to wear these items and perform this hand hygiene.

What happens when I go home?

- When you return home, it is important for you, your family, and your friends to continue the good hand hygiene practices that you have been taught in hospital every day.
- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine, or faeces. They must wash their hands as well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.
- If your viral meningitis is caused by the mumps virus or the chicken pox virus, ask your nurse for a specific information sheet about these illnesses.

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Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department, ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively, contact your Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055.

References

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017_013

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Meningitis Index Information Sheets (January 21, 2020)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Viral Meningitis Information Sheet (May 25, 2021)

Meningitis Centre Australia (Website); Viral Meningitis Information Sheet (Accessed 21 July 2021)