



Factsheet on Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

The term meningitis refers to a medical condition in which the membranes covering the brain and the spinal cord (the meninges) become inflamed.

It can be caused by a number of factors, but is most commonly caused by infection from bacteria, viruses or fungi.

What causes viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is caused by a range of different viruses and is milder than the meningitis caused by bacteria (for example meningococcal meningitis). These viruses are common in the community and usually cause mild respiratory infections but can occasionally cause a person to develop meningitis.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Headache is the most obvious symptom but other symptoms can include:

- neck stiffness
- photophobia (dislike of bright lights)
- fever
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- aching joints and muscle pain

In the early stages of the illness there is often little to distinguish viral meningitis from other common viral infections such as influenza or 'flu-like' illness.

What is the treatment?

In most cases people with viral meningitis are treated with pain-killers for their headache and require lots of rest.

Occasionally, in more severe cases people may be admitted to hospital and anti-viral drugs may be given.

People with viral meningitis may sometimes be given a course of antibiotics (before they receive a confirmed diagnosis) just in case they have bacterial meningitis.

Antibiotics will not have any effect on viral infections.

How is viral meningitis managed?

Most adults who get viral meningitis will not require admission to hospital, but some people may be admitted to exclude a more serious diagnosis such as bacterial meningitis.

It is more likely that children who develop viral meningitis will be treated in hospital, though mild cases can be cared for at home.

The vast majority of people (both adults and children) who develop viral meningitis will make a complete recovery.

Is it necessary to keep my child away from school or nursery if they have been in contact with viral meningitis?

Contacts of people with viral meningitis are not usually at any increased risk of developing the illness themselves. This applies to the closest contacts, including family and household members.

There is no need for the contacts of a person with viral meningitis to be given antibiotics as these are not effective against viruses.

There is no need for contacts to stay away from work or school.

How does viral meningitis spread?

The viruses that can cause meningitis are passed from person to person by coughing and sneezing, and by contaminated hands that have not been washed.

Further information

Further information can be found at: The Meningitis Research Foundation 080 8800 3344 www.meningitis.org/ Meningitis Now 0808 8010 388 www.meningitisnow.org/

This factsheet has been reviewed by a multi-disciplinary team from the North West.

Further advice may be obtained from Cumbria and Lancashire Public Health England Centre. Telephone 0844 225 0602