



Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (the covering of the brain and spinal cord). Children with meningitis often have sudden symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness. Children may also have nausea, vomiting, and a worse headache when in a lighted area. Sometimes infants with meningitis also have a bulging fontanelle, irritable cry, and seizures. Meningitis can resemble a bad case of the flu.

What causes viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis can be caused by a direct viral infection or from the spread of the virus from another infection such as mumps or the flu.

What is a spinal tap?

It is very important to determine whether a virus or bacteria are causing the meningitis. While children with viral meningitis usually get better without special treatment, bacterial meningitis can be life threatening. It is for this reason that your child may need to undergo a test called a lumbar puncture (spinal tap).

A lumbar puncture is a procedure in which a hollow needle is inserted in the spinal canal in the lower back to withdraw a small amount of spinal fluid. This procedure is very safe. By examining the fluid, the doctor can determine if the meningitis is viral or bacterial. A blood culture may be done to try to find the bacteria causing the infection.

How long will the effects last?

Children with viral meningitis usually recover without any problems. Since different viruses can cause the illness, the length of time it takes a child to feel better can vary from 2 days to 2 weeks. Headaches may last from 1 to 2 weeks. You should notice a gradual improvement.

How is it treated?

Children with viral meningitis can often be treated at home. There is no medication your child can take to cure viral meningitis. (Antibiotics are not helpful.) Your child will eventually get better on his or her own. You can help

your child at home by following these home care instructions:

- **Fluids** Encourage your child to drink clear fluids. This will help avoid dehydration.
- **Pain Control** Your child may need acetaminophen or ibuprofen for his or her headache and body aches. Do not give aspirin.
- **Rest** Your child may feel better if he or she lies down in a quiet place with dim lighting.

How can I help prevent it from spreading?

The virus causing the meningitis can be passed from person to person. The length of time your child will be contagious can be anywhere from 2 days to 2 weeks, depending on the virus. Your doctor will let you know when your child is no longer contagious and can return to normal activities. Until then, you should follow these precautionary measures:

- Wash your child's hands frequently.
- Wash your hands frequently and make sure anyone who has contact with your child does the same.
- Do not let family members share cups or utensils.
- Avoid contact with saliva, such as by kissing a child.

Talk with your health care provider about vaccines for meningitis.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Spikes a fever over 105 F.
- You are unable to awaken your child.
- The headache or neck pain cannot be controlled after 2 hours of ibuprofen or acetaminophen.
- Purple or blood-colored spots or dots occur on the skin.
- Your child develops unsteady walking, slurred speech, or acts confused.
- Your child has a seizure.
- Your child starts to act very sick.
- You or someone who has had contact with your child develops symptoms of meningitis.

Call within 24 hours if:

- Your child is vomiting or refusing to drink.
- You have other questions or concerns.

*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.