

Meningitis (viral)

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (the thin lining of the brain and spinal cord). It can be caused by a number of different viruses and is often a complication of another viral illness. It is a fairly common disease. Almost all cases occur as single, isolated events. Outbreaks are rare.

Most cases of viral meningitis are mild and most people make an excellent recovery. Some people may be hospitalised for a short time. However, on rare occasions viral meningitis can be life threatening or cause lasting after effects, particularly if people have problems with their immune system.

Viral meningitis is more common in children but it can occur in any age group.

Viral meningitis is more common than bacterial meningitis (such as pneumococcal and meningococcal meningitis) and the number of cases usually increases during the summer. In Queensland, around 300 people are admitted to hospital with viral meningitis each year.

Signs and Symptoms:

The symptoms of viral meningitis are usually milder than those associated with bacterial meningitis and may begin with flu-like symptoms. Symptoms may include a headache, nausea or vomiting, fever, generally feeling unwell, neck stiffness, discomfort with bright lights, joint aches and pains, muscle aches, drowsiness or confusion, and sometimes a rash or sore throat, stomach pains or diarrhoea. The symptoms may occur in any order and may not all be present at the same time or during the whole course of the illness.

The symptoms of viral meningitis can be quite similar to those of bacterial meningitis. As bacterial meningitis can sometimes cause death within hours, it is important that people seek medical attention as soon as possible if they are concerned that they may have meningitis.

Treatment:

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Antibiotics do not work on viruses. Treatment depends upon the severity of the symptoms. Treatment is generally the same as for any other viral infection and consists of plenty of rest, pain medication as necessary and plenty of fluids.

Transmission:

The way a virus is spread between people depends on the specific virus. Some viruses that can cause meningitis are spread from person to person by respiratory secretions, others through contact with faecal matter.

Prevention:

You can minimise the risk of contracting or spreading many viral infections, including viral meningitis, by simple measures.

In particular you should wash your hands thoroughly, with warm soapy water for at least 15 seconds after going to the toilet, blowing your nose, and before eating.

There is no vaccine against viral meningitis.

Help and assistance:

For further information contact your local doctor, nearest [public health unit](#) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units>) or 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84).