

Meningitis (all types)

Meningitis is an infection of the meninges, the thin lining around the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis can be caused by bacteria or viruses. While some forms of meningitis are mild and resolve without treatment, meningitis can be potentially life-threatening. Prompt medical assessment is necessary.

Bacterial meningitis

Meningitis caused by bacteria is called 'bacterial meningitis'. Bacterial meningitis is usually serious and requires very prompt medical attention.

Some common types of bacterial meningitis are:

- Hib meningitis - caused by *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) bacteria. This was the most common type of meningitis in Australia until a national vaccination program started in 1992.
- Meningococcal meningitis – caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria
- Pneumococcal meningitis – caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria.

Viral meningitis

Meningitis caused by viruses is called 'viral meningitis'. It is relatively common. Most cases of viral meningitis are mild. Some people may be hospitalised for a short time. On rare occasions viral meningitis can be life threatening. It can be caused by various different viruses and is often a complication of another viral illness.

Signs and Symptoms:

The symptoms of meningitis don't appear in any particular order and may appear differently in different people.

In older children and adults symptoms of meningitis can include headache, fever, vomiting, neck stiffness, drowsiness and confusion, and discomfort looking at bright lights.

In babies and young children symptoms can include fever, cold hands or feet, refusing feeds or vomiting, fretfulness, being difficult to wake or lethargic, and sometimes a high-pitched moaning cry or whimpering.

There may also be a rash, particularly with meningococcal meningitis where there is often a characteristic purplish-red rash that does not fade under pressure.

Blood tests and a lumbar puncture (removal of spinal fluid through a needle) are often required to determine if meningitis is viral or bacterial.

The symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are often quite similar. If anyone has the above symptoms, seek urgent medical attention. Early treatment can sometimes prevent serious complications.

Treatment:

Early and rapid diagnosis is very important in treating bacterial meningitis. Treatment usually requires hospitalisation and antibiotics given intravenously.

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Antibiotics do not work on viruses. 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:

People of any age can carry the types of bacteria that cause bacterial meningitis in their nose or throat without becoming ill. They may then spread the bacteria to others through coughing or sneezing, although most of these people will not go on to develop meningitis. Prolonged close contact is usually needed for spread of the bacteria to occur.

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

Prevention:

Some forms of bacterial meningitis can be prevented by vaccination:

- *Haemophilus influenzae* type b – Hib vaccine is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program and is available free for all children at 6 weeks, 4 months, 6 months and 12 months of age and is administered in a combination vaccine.
- Meningococcal
 - a vaccine is available for the meningococcal B strain; however, this vaccine is not currently on the National Immunisation Schedule; for more information visit your GP or immunisation provider.

- a vaccine for meningococcal C strain is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program and the vaccine is available free for all children at 12 months of age.
- a vaccine against meningococcal A, C, W and Y strains is being offered free to all Year 10 students in Queensland through the School Immunisation Program in 2017, and to young people 15 to 19 years of age through their doctor or immunisation provider from June 2017 until May 2018.
- Pneumococcal – pneumococcal vaccine is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program and is available free for all children at 6 weeks, 4 months, 6 months with additional doses for children in certain high-risk groups.

See the specific fact sheets listed below for further information on vaccination.

The spread of viruses that can cause viral meningitis can be minimised 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.

Health outcome:

While bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics, it can sometimes result in death or permanent disabilities such as brain damage, deafness and damage to limbs.

Most people with viral meningitis make an excellent recovery, but occasionally it can result in permanent disabilities.

Other resources:

[Immunise Australia](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au) (<http://www.immunise.health.gov.au>) (call 1800 671 811)

[Queensland Health immunisation information](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/topics/immunisation) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/topics/immunisation>)

[13 HEALTH](https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html) (<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html>) (Call 13 43 25 84)

Related Content

- [Meningitis \(viral\)](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/217/457/Meningitis-viral) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/217/457/Meningitis-viral>)
- [Meningococcal disease](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/95/Meningococcal-Disease) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/95/Meningococcal-Disease>)
- [Haemophilus influenzae type b \(Hib\)](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/67/Haemophilus-Influenza-type-b-Hib) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/67/Haemophilus-Influenza-type-b-Hib>)
- [Pneumococcal disease](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/112/Pneumococcal-Disease) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/33/112/Pneumococcal-Disease>)

Help and assistance:

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