

Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and fluid that surrounds the brain. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a virus or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis may be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability.

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

High fever, headache and stiff neck are common symptoms in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1-2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion and sleepiness. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

How is meningitis diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid.

Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important however, that treatment is started early in the course of the disease.

Is meningitis contagious?

Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. However, several types of bacteria that may cause meningitis include the following: *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal meningitis), *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, Group B strep, *Haemophilus influenzae* (Hib) or *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Vaccinations are available for the prevention of meningitis. Please contact your child's physician for further information.