

Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the membrane or thin lining that covers the brain and spinal cord, usually caused by a virus or bacteria.

Is it important to know the type of meningitis?

Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacteria is important because the severity of illness, its treatment and the prevention of spread to other people are different.

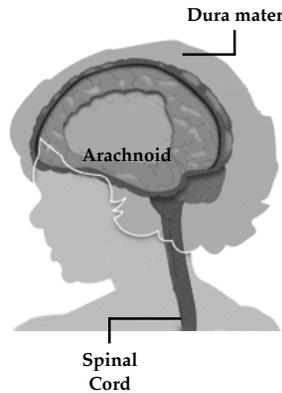
While viral meningitis is generally less serious and clears up within a week or two without specific treatment, bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in complications such as brain damage, hearing loss, learning disabilities or death.

Who gets meningitis and how?

Although older children and adults can get bacterial meningitis, it is most common in infants and children under five years of age. Usually germs causing meningitis are carried in the upper back part of the throat. They are spread through coughing, kissing and sneezing.

Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as the common cold or the flu. They cannot live outside the body for long, so they cannot be picked up by casual contact, water supplies, swimming pools, buildings or areas where a person with meningitis has been.

Sometimes, however, the bacteria have spread to people who have had close or prolonged contact with the patient. People in the same household or child care setting, or anyone with direct contact to the patient's oral secretions, would be considered at increased risk of getting the infection.



What are the signs and symptoms?

Young children with meningitis show symptoms of unusual irritability, loss of appetite, vomiting, fever and excessive, loud crying. Older children and adults may experience severe headache, fever, stiff neck and vomiting.

These symptoms may quickly progress to unconsciousness, convulsions and death. So, if any child displays symptoms of possible meningitis, he or she should receive immediate medical care.

Can bacterial meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. However, it is important to start treatment early.

When should people with this illness return to child care?

People with meningitis generally feel too ill to attend child care. They can return when they feel better with no fever, or when the health care provider determines the disease is no longer contagious.

How can bacterial meningitis be prevented?

The best ways to prevent the spread of meningitis are to:

1. Always practice good hand washing and hygiene.
2. Make sure your children are appropriately immunized.
3. Immediately call your health care provider if you or your children come into close contact with infected people. You may be given antibiotics for protection against infection.
4. Do not allow children to share bottles, toys or other items placed in the mouth.

Where can I get more information?

- *Child Care Healthline* at (800) 333-3212.
- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*—call (800) 232-2522 or (800) 232-0233 (Spanish) or visit www.cdc.gov/nip.
- *Meningitis Foundation of America*—call (800) 668-1129 or visit www.musa.org.

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Provided by California Childcare Health Program
For more information, please contact:
Healthline 1-800-333-3212

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