



Meningitis

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is a disease caused by the inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord known as the meninges. The inflammation is usually caused by an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

Meningitis may develop in response to a number of causes, usually bacteria or viruses, but meningitis can also be caused by physical injury, cancer or the use of certain drugs.

How is it spread?

Bacterial Meningitis is contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions, including saliva.

Viral Meningitis, commonly caused by enteroviruses, is most often spread from person to person through fecal contamination (which can occur when changing a diaper or using the toilet and not properly washing hands afterwards). It can also be spread via eye, nose, and mouth secretions (such as saliva, nasal mucus, or sputum), or blister fluid.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Early symptoms can include headache, vomiting, muscle pain and fever with cold hands and feet, stiff neck, light sensitivity, and confusion.

Should a person with meningitis be isolated?

Persons with **bacterial meningitis** should be excluded from work/school until appropriate antibiotic treatment is received and they are fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications. Siblings or close contacts do not need to be excluded from work/school.

Persons with **viral meningitis** should be excluded from work/school until fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications. Siblings or close contacts do not need to be excluded from work/school.

What type of treatment and care should be given?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated effectively with antibiotics. It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible.

Usually there is no specific treatment for **viral meningitis**, but in some instances specific treatment is available depending on the virus causing the inflammation. Antibiotics do not help viral infections, so they are not useful in the treatment of viral meningitis. Most patients completely recover on their own within 7 to 10 days. A hospital stay may be necessary in more severe cases or for people with weak immune systems.

Is there a vaccination against this disease?

The most effective way to protect against certain types of **bacterial meningitis** is appropriate vaccination. Vaccination is available through a health care provider or at the Hamilton Health Centre, 67 Victoria Street, Hamilton.

There are no vaccines for the most common causes of **viral meningitis**. Thus, the best way to prevent viral meningitis is to prevent the spread of viral infections: wash hands thoroughly and often; disinfect commonly touched surfaces; avoid sharing cups or eating utensils; get vaccinated on schedule to prevent diseases that can lead to viral meningitis.

Adapted from:

Meningitis. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014 (<http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/>, accessed 5 March 2014)