

Kent County Health Department

# Viral and Bacterial Meningitis Fact Sheet



**HEALTH**  
DEPARTMENT  
*Caring today for a healthy tomorrow*

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. It is caused by a viral or bacterial infection.

- Discomfort looking into bright light
- Confusion
- Sleepiness
- Rash

What is the difference between viral and bacterial meningitis?

Viral meningitis is usually less severe and resolves without special treatment. Many different viruses can cause meningitis. Most of them are more common during the summer and fall months.

Since it is difficult to tell the difference between viral or bacterial meningitis, if you think you or your child has it, see your doctor right away.

Bacterial meningitis is extremely serious. It may result in brain damage, hearing loss or learning disability. It is important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from infecting other people. The earlier the treatment starts the more successful it is. Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

In newborns and young babies, these symptoms may be hard to detect. The baby may only appear slow or inactive, be irritable, have vomiting, or be eating poorly.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Often the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis are the same. Usually, people either do not get sick at all from the germs that cause meningitis or they have mild flu-like symptoms. In more serious cases, symptoms include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Irritability

Can meningitis be spread from person to person?

Yes, bacterial meningitis is contagious. The bacteria are spread from person to person through direct contact with the respiratory and throat secretions (saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. Fortunately, these bacteria are not as contagious as the common cold or flu. Also, the bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Viruses that cause meningitis can be spread via respiratory secretions or stool of an infected person. Contact with an individual with viral meningitis may increase one's chances of becoming infected with the virus that made them sick, but those infected will have a small chance of developing meningitis as a complication of their illness.

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Should I keep my child home from school?

Children with bacterial meningitis are usually hospitalized.

There are no specific exclusions from school for viral meningitis, but hospitalization is common.

Who gets meningitis?

People of any age can get meningitis. It is more common among:

- Children younger than 5 years of age
- Young adults
- Elderly

People with certain blood clotting disorders and people who have lost their spleen are also more likely to get meningitis.

How soon do infected people get sick?

Symptoms usually begin within three or four days after exposure to the germ.

However, onset may vary from as early as two days to as late as 10 days.

How can meningitis be prevented?

Because most people who are infected do not become sick, it can be hard to prevent the spread of the germ. However, good personal hygiene and hand washing lowers your chances of getting infected.

There is preventive therapy for people who have had close personal contact with someone infected with bacterial meningitis.

**However, only certain bacterial infections require preventive treatment with antibiotics for those contacts.** If diagnosed with bacterial meningitis, the Kent County Health Department can help

determine which close contacts should be treated with antibiotics. Preventive therapy is generally not necessary for people who have only shared office or classroom space.

Is there a vaccine for meningitis?

A vaccine against one type of meningitis has been developed (Neisseria Meningitis). It does not provide protection against all strains in the United States. College freshman living in dorms are recommended to get a meningitis vaccination. People traveling overseas should check to see if a meningitis vaccination is recommended for where they are going.

Vaccines for *Haemophilus influenzae* type B (Hib), once a leading cause of bacterial meningitis, are given to all children as part of their routine immunizations.

All people over 65 years of age and children less than two years of age with certain chronic medical conditions should get a pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine to prevent meningitis and other infections caused by *S. pneumoniae*.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about meningitis or think you may have it, call your health care provider.*