



HEALTH INFORMATION

Viral Meningitis

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the protective membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord. It is the most common and less serious type of meningitis. The condition is more common in children.

Many different viruses can cause meningitis; the most common are a group called enteroviruses. These viruses live in the intestines and can commonly cause colds, sore throats, stomach upsets and diarrhoea. Only rarely do these viruses spread through the body to the protective membranes that surround the brain and cause meningitis.

There are many other viruses that can cause meningitis. The mumps virus was the most common known cause of viral meningitis in young children under five years of age before the introduction of the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella)

Because many different viruses can cause meningitis, the way in which the virus is spread will depend on its type. For example some viruses can be passed from person to person by coughing, sneezing and on unwashed hands.

Symptoms

Meningitis is difficult to diagnose as the symptoms are usually similar to flu symptoms and come on suddenly.

The condition can be classed as severe or mild. In more serious cases symptoms may include:-

- neck stiffness
- muscle or joint pain

- diarrhoea
- light sensitivity

It is not possible to determine whether meningitis is bacterial or viral without clinical tests being carried out. If symptoms of meningitis are suspected particularly in a young child, then medical advice should be sought as soon as possible.

Treatment

Most cases of viral meningitis will not require hospitalisation, and can be treated with rest and pain relief medication, combined with medication to help prevent nausea.

Is it contagious?

Viral meningitis tends to be isolated. Therefore there is low risk of spreading. Practising good hygiene, such as washing hands after going to the toilet, will help to prevent the spread of viruses. Most people tend to recover from viral meningitis within two weeks.