

# Viral vs Bacterial Meningitis

## What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the tissues covering the brain and spinal cord (meninges). Viral meningitis is an infection caused by viruses and bacterial meningitis is an infection caused by bacteria.

## What is the difference between viral and bacterial meningitis?

Viral meningitis is usually less serious and goes away without treatment. Many different viruses can cause viral meningitis. Most of the viruses are common during the summer and fall months.

Bacterial meningitis is extremely serious. Brain damage, hearing loss or learning disability may happen after having bacterial meningitis. It is important to know what bacteria are causing bacterial meningitis so that the correct medicine can be used to prevent others from getting sick. The earlier the medicine is given the more successful it is. *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are two kinds of bacteria that cause bacterial meningitis. *Haemophilus influenzae* type b bacteria mostly attacks the very young but with the vaccination program in infants, meningitis in children happens less frequently.

## What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Often the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis are the same. Symptoms can include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Irritability
- Discomfort looking into bright light
- Confusion
- Sleepiness
- Rash

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

## How is meningitis spread?

Many of the viruses that cause viral meningitis can be spread through saliva or stool. Bacteria that cause bacterial meningitis can spread person-to-person through contact with fluids from the mouth or nose of a sick person. Most people already have natural protection against many of these germs.

## How can I prevent meningitis?

- **Wash your hands.** Make sure hands are properly washed after using the toilet, changing diapers, wiping a child's nose, helping others toilet, before preparing food, etc.

### **The six steps to good hand washing are:**

- **Wet hands** with warm running water
- **Put liquid soap on hands**
- **Lather hands and scrub for 20 seconds**
- **Rinse** under running water
- **Dry** your hands with paper towels
- **Use the towel to turn off the taps**

### **An alcohol-based hand rub can be added to your hand hygiene routine:**

- **Apply the hand rub to your hands. Use an amount** about the size of a dime.
- **Rub your hands together until the hand rub is gone.** Hands will feel dry in about 15 seconds.

- **Do not share anything that has been in someone else's mouth.**
- **Make sure that you and your family are up to date with your immunizations.** Bacteria such as *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b can cause meningitis and can be prevented through immunization.

If you have meningitis, you may be contacted by Middlesex-London Health Unit for follow-up.

**For more information, contact the Infectious Diseases Control Team  
at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to [www.healthunit.com](http://www.healthunit.com)**

Information adapted from:

Center of Disease Control Meningitis (2014). *Meningitis*. Retrieved on May 12, 2015 from [www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html)

Center of Disease Control Meningitis (2014). *Bacterial Meningitis*. Retrieved on May 12, 2015 from [www.cdc.gov/meningitis/bacterial.html](http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/bacterial.html)

Center of Disease Control Meningitis (2014). *Viral Meningitis*. Retrieved on May 12, 2015 from [www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html](http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html)

**Date of Creation: February 15, 2013**

**Last Modified on: October 11, 2018**