Dear Alice,

I would like to know how meningitis is transmitted. Can it be cured, treated, and/or easily prevented?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Meningitis, an infection and inflammation of the tissue that surrounds the brain and spinal cord (meninges), can be caused by a number of culprits, including viruses and bacteria. Although less common, meningitis can also be caused by parasites, fungus, physical injury, cancer, or certain drugs. The prevention methods, mode of transmission, severity of illness, and treatment will depend on the cause. Symptoms, regardless of cause, could include:

- Fever
- Headache or body aches
- A stiff neck
- Vomiting or nausea
- Confusion
- Sensitivity to light

Here’s some good news: There are steps you can take to prevent some forms of meningitis. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including:

- There are vaccinations available to prevent certain types of bacterial meningitis. Although there are no vaccines for the most common causes of viral infections, making sure you are up-to-date on all of your vaccinations can protect you against some of the diseases that can lead to viral meningitis (e.g., measles and mumps). Consult your health care provider to see if you’re caught up with all vaccinations and to see if the bacterial meningitis vaccine is right for you.
- Careful and vigorous hand washing before eating and after using the bathroom.
- Not sharing objects that make contact with the mouth or lips (e.g., eating utensils, cups, cigarettes, lipstick or lip balm, toothbrushes), especially with a person who is sick or exhibiting symptoms.
- Not coming into close contact with people who are sick and disinfecting any contaminated areas.
- Maintaining a healthy, immune-boosting lifestyle with plenty of rest, regular physical activity
Meningitis is quite rare, and depending on the type, is transmitted in different ways. Some forms of bacterial meningitis may be spread by contact with saliva, feces, and respiratory and throat secretions. This means that kissing, sharing spoons and forks, or other objects that are put in the mouth, can spread bacterial meningitis. Because of this, people who spend a lot of time together in close quarters (e.g., college students, especially those living in residence halls) are at a higher risk for infection. Although bacterial meningitis is contagious, it’s not as contagious as the common cold or flu and cannot be spread through casual contact with an infected person (e.g., being in the same room). Enteroviruses, the most common culprit behind viral meningitis, are most often spread from close contact to someone who has it. That said, only a small number of people actually develop viral meningitis after exposure. Other types of meningitis, caused by fungus, amoebas, parasites, physical injury, cancer, or certain drugs are not contagious. That is, these types of meningitis are not transmitted from person to person.

Identifying and treating the infection early is critical for a full recovery. In order to accurately diagnose the condition and identify the cause, a health care provider will likely get a sample of a patient’s cerebrospinal fluid to analyze. Blood or stool samples and swabs of the nose, throat, or rectum may also be in order to provide evidence of infection. Viral meningitis is less severe and typically goes away without treatment; that said, bed rest, plenty of fluids, and over-the-counter pain relievers may be recommended to aid in recovery. Bacterial meningitis is potentially fatal, but can be successfully treated if caught early. Treatment may include antibiotics, corticosteroids (to reduce brain swelling), intravenous (IV) fluids, or hospitalization. In addition, people who have come in close contact with other people with bacterial meningitis may be given preventive antibiotics to steer clear of infection. Fungal meningitis is treated with antifungal medications (usually following a confirmed diagnosis, as these medications can have serious side effects) and parasitic meningitis (which is very rare) is treated with a variety of different medications. Other non-infectious forms of meningitis, such as those caused by allergic reactions or cancer, may be treated by condition-specific therapies or corticosteroids.

If you believe you have meningitis, are concerned you’ve been exposed to someone with meningitis, or if you’re considering the meningitis vaccine, reach out to your health care provider.

Wishing you health,

Alice!

Category:
General Health
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments

Related questions
What to do for headaches? I was bitten by a mosquito? West Nile virus? Meningitis: Should I get the vaccine? Measles

Resources