Meningitis [1]

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:

- **Vaccination** [2]? 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 healthcare provider to see if you’re caught up with all vaccinations and to see if the bacterial meningitis vaccine is right for you.
- Not sharing objects that make contact with the mouth or lips (e.g., eating utensils, cups, cigarettes, lipstick or chapstick, 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 [4], regular exercise [5]
Meningitis is quite rare, and depending on the type, contracted 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 first years, living in residence halls) are at a higher risk for infection. However, although bacterial meningitis is contagious, it is 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 type of viral meningitis, are most often spread from person to person through fecal contamination. Fungal meningitis and meningitis caused by physical injury, cancer, or certain drugs are not contagious. That is, these types of meningitis are not transmitted from person to person.

While viral meningitis is the most common form, bacterial meningitis is usually the more serious cause for concern (and, thus, one reason to consider a meningitis vaccination). Viral meningitis is less severe and typically goes away without treatment; bacterial meningitis is potentially fatal, but can be successfully treated if caught early. Fungal meningitis is treated with antifungal medications and parasitic meningitis (which is very rare) is treated with a variety of different medications.

Treatment of bacterial meningitis may include antibiotics, intravenous fluids, and/or hospitalization. Identifying and treating the infection early is very important for a full recovery. In order to identify the bacteria, a clinician may perform a spinal tap, where s/he will take a sample of a patient’s cerebrospinal fluid, which is then analyzed. 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.

If you believe you have meningitis, have been exposed to someone with meningitis, or if you are considering the meningitis vaccine, don’t hesitate to contact your health care provider.

Wishing you health,

Alice!

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