Let's Talk About...Meningitis

Meningitis—it even sounds serious. Just what is it?
Meningitis means "inflammation of the meninges (men-IN-jeez)". That's the fluid-like tissue that surrounds the spinal cord and brain. Some people refer to it as "spinal meningitis". And yes, it is serious.

What causes it?
The most frequent cause of meningitis is a viral or bacterial infection. Less often, a fungus can cause it. It's important to know the cause of meningitis because viral meningitis is usually less severe and generally people get better without any treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be very serious and needs to be treated with the right antibiotics. Bacterial meningitis can have some serious side effects.

Just what are the symptoms of the viral and bacterial kind? Are they the same?
The signs and symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis can be the same but the symptoms are not necessarily the same for everyone. Common symptoms for any meningitis are high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, suddenly feeling sleepy, confusion, and being sensitive to bright lights. These symptoms can happen very fast, even within a few hours, or they can gradually take a day or 2 to develop. In babies, symptoms usually include fever, vomiting, acting sleepy, eating poorly or not at all, and being difficult to wake up. Skin rash and seizures can occur in both children and adults. The illness can progress very quickly so it is important to get medical attention as soon as possible.

How does a doctor diagnose meningitis?
Early diagnosis and treatment is very important. The doctor will take blood samples and do a spinal tap if meningitis is suspected. A spinal tap is a procedure where a needle is inserted into the lower back and fluid is obtained for testing. A culture is done on the blood and spinal fluid and can take a few days to complete. For bacterial meningitis, it is important to know the kind of bacteria that is causing the illness so the correct antibiotics can be given. Specific testing for viral meningitis may not be done since people generally get better without any treatment.

So if I get viral meningitis, the doctor won't give me any medicine. Isn't there anything that they can do?
Bed rest and medicine to relieve headache and fever is the usual treatment for viral meningitis. The illness lasts for about 7—10 days and patients recover completely.

Can you catch viral meningitis from someone who has it?
The viruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious. However, most people who get the virus usually have very mild or no symptoms. Mild symptoms include low-grade fever, rash or a cold. Very few people (like 1 in 1,000) will develop meningitis.

Does the Health Department get reports on people who have viral meningitis?
No. The viruses are very common, especially during summer and early fall, and many people are exposed to them, but few people ever get really sick.

Is there any way to avoid getting sick from those viruses?
The viruses are pretty common and many people are exposed but it does help to WASH YOUR HANDS! Cleaning surfaces can be helpful, especially in a daycare situation. The CDC has complete information at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/enterovirus/viral_meningitis.htm.

What about the more serious one, bacterial meningitis?
That's a whole different ballgame. Bacterial meningitis can be caused by several different kinds of
bacteria and can be treated with antibiotics. But treatment needs to start early. Even with appropriate antibiotic treatment, about 10-15% of people who get it will die.

Is it contagious?
Yes, some forms are. Fortunately, it doesn't spread as easily as a cold or flu. Bacteria don't live in the air or on surfaces for longer than a few minutes. So just being in the same room with someone or touching a patient who has it does not put a person at risk of getting bacterial meningitis. One bacterium, *Neisseria meningitidis*, can spread to people who have had close, prolonged contact with someone diagnosed with it. People who live in the same house or go to the same day care center, or anyone who had contact with a patient's saliva would be at greater risk of getting it.

So I just wash my hands to keep the germs away?
Not so easy this time. Since some forms of bacterial meningitis are spread through contact with saliva and other respiratory secretions, activities like kissing, sharing eating and drinking utensils, using the same water bottle, or cigarette sharing can put people at risk of getting meningitis.

Does the Health Department get reports on bacterial meningitis?
Yes. The law requires that laboratories and physicians report these cases within 24 hours of diagnosis. Most hospitals will report suspected cases of certain kinds of bacterial meningitis (like *Neisseria meningitidis*). Close contacts and others at risk of exposure to *Neisseria* can be given antibiotics to prevent them from getting the illness. The Health Department's Communicable Disease Control nurses will be in touch with contacts of known patients to make sure they are given the correct antibiotics.

Can you get meningitis more than once?
Yes. Since there are many different kinds of bacteria, viruses and fungi that cause meningitis, having one kind won't keep you from getting infected with another.

What about shots to protect me?
Yes, there are vaccinations that protect against some types of bacteria, but not all. A good source of information on these vaccinations is [http://www.vaccineinformation.org/menin/qandavax.asp](http://www.vaccineinformation.org/menin/qandavax.asp) and [http://www.vaccineinformation.org/pneumchild/qandavax.asp](http://www.vaccineinformation.org/pneumchild/qandavax.asp).

What if I want to ask a real person for more information?
Contact a Mecklenburg County Health Department Communicable Disease Control nurse at 704.336.5490 or 704.336.5398.