

Meningitis

What is meningitis?

The linings that cover the brain and spinal cord are called meninges. Meningitis is an inflammation or swelling of these linings. The shaded areas in the picture show where the swelling occurs.

What causes it?

Meningitis is most often caused by an infection. There are many types of germs (bacteria or viruses) that cause meningitis. The germs enter the body through the nose or mouth. Once in the body, they multiply and enter the blood vessels. Once these germs get to the brain, they cause an infection of the meninges.

Even though these germs are all around us, most people exposed to the germs do not get sick. When meningitis occurs, it is usually because resistance to infection is low, the child is very young, or there is another illness.

How does it affect my child?

An **infant** with meningitis may have:

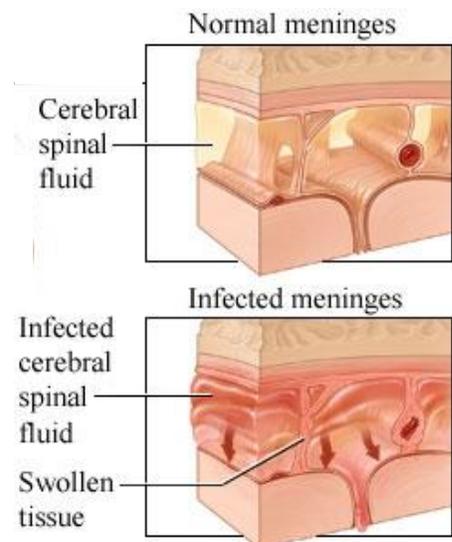
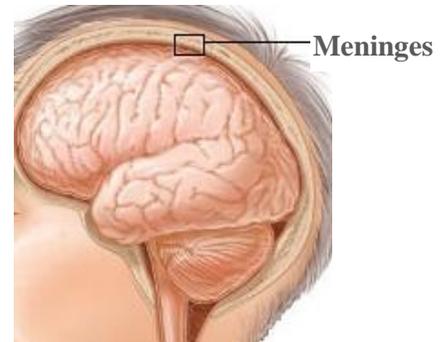
- Fever
- Decreased appetite
- High-pitched sound to the cry
- Body temperature lower than normal
- Bulging or tense soft spot on the top of the head
- Vomiting
- Stiff neck
- Irritability

A **child** with meningitis may have:

- Fever
- Trouble hearing
- Sleepiness
- Bad headache
- Vomiting
- Decreased appetite
- Stiff neck
- Eyes that are sensitive to light

What tests might be done?

- **Blood tests.** These are done to check for an infection.
- **A spinal tap (lumbar puncture or LP).** This is done to test the spinal fluid or CSF. A small sample of spinal fluid is taken from your child's back. Spinal fluid also touches the linings that cover the brain, so germs that infect the linings can be found with this test.



Tests (continued)

- **Stool tests.** These tests help find which germ may be causing the infection.
- **CT scan of the head.** A CT scan is a special kind of x-ray. The scan will show if there is swelling of the linings or the brain.

How is it treated?

- Your child may be in the hospital for a few days to many weeks.
- Your child may stay in an isolation room for some time while in the hospital. This will keep the infection from spreading to other people.
- Quiet rest is very important. Your child may be very sensitive to light and noise.
- Medicine may be given to your child for pain.
- If bacteria caused meningitis, antibiotics are given. This medicine will be given through an IV.
- If the meningitis is caused by a virus, your child may get antibiotics for the first few days of the illness. Once it is known that your child's infection is not caused by bacteria, the antibiotics may be stopped.

What follow up care might be needed?

- If your child has been in daycare, preschool or has had close contact with other children, others may have been exposed to the germ. Your child's daycare or school may be called so that others can be protected from getting the illness. For one type of germ that causes meningitis, the doctor may prescribe medicine to protect your family or others.
- Meningitis can be a scary disease. Your child may be very crabby or sleepy. You may feel there is little you can do to comfort your child. This may be a hard time for you as a parent. Talk with your child's doctor or nurse about any questions or concerns you may have.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any concerns or if your child has special health care needs not covered by this information.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.