



MEDIA RELEASE

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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HANDWASHING IS BEST DEFENSE AGAINST VIRAL MENINGITIS

Nashville: Health officials say that it looks like a bad year for viral meningitis, but the transmission of the viruses and bacteria that cause meningitis can be reduced by following common practices of good hygiene and handwashing.

Meningitis is an illness caused by an infection from either viruses or bacteria, in which there is inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis is the most common and the least serious type of meningitis, and it is not uncommon in the summer and fall months. Statistics on the number of cases of viral meningitis are not available because the disease is not reportable to the Department of Health, but anecdotal reports suggest that the number of cases of viral meningitis occurring in Tennessee this year is higher than usual. Antibiotics cannot treat or prevent viral meningitis, because antibiotics only kill bacteria, not viruses.

“Viruses are spread from person to person, such as by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose, mouth or eyes. Washing your hands correctly will greatly reduce the chances of having those germs enter your body when you touch your nose or mouth, or spreading them to others through handling food or person to person contact,” said Dr. Allen Craig, State Epidemiologist. “You should also avoid sharing eating utensils, beverage containers or other things you put in your mouth.”

Most persons who are infected with these viruses either have no symptoms or develop only a cold or low-grade fever. Typically, fewer than 1 of every 1,000 persons infected actually develop meningitis. Those people who do get meningitis may have a stiff neck, headache, fever, nausea and vomiting. While no therapy is available for viral meningitis, most patients make a full recovery.

The Department of Health offers the following recommendations to avoid infection:

- If you are in contact with someone who has viral or bacterial meningitis, the best way to prevent infection is to wash your hands for at least 15-20 seconds with soap and running water and do it often. Be sure to wash all surfaces thoroughly, including the wrists, fingers, palms and top of hands, between fingers, and under fingernails.

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- Wash your hands after each diaper change of a small child.
- Never share eating utensils, beverage containers, straws, drinks, cigarettes or other things you put in your mouth.
- In settings such as child care centers or schools, washing objects and surfaces with a diluted bleach solution (made by mixing one capful of chlorine-containing household bleach with one gallon of water) can be a good way to inactivate the virus.
- Do not send your children to school while ill.

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