

Fact Sheet

Cytomegalovirus



What is cytomegalovirus (CMV)?

Cytomegalovirus is a virus. The name means "big cell" virus. It is related to the glandular fever virus, EBV, and is a member of the family of herpes viruses. Other herpes viruses are herpes simplex (which causes cold sores), varicella-zoster (causes chickenpox and shingles), EBV, and the virus which causes roseola (a measles-like rash).

All herpes viruses can be hidden in the body for years after first causing an infection. They may then come back again later. For example, the chickenpox virus first causes chickenpox, but may come back years later and cause shingles.

What does CMV cause?

In children and adults CMV infection may cause:

- a cold or a respiratory illness with cough and fever
- an illness with rash and fever, or
- a glandular fever-like illness with big glands and fever.

All these illnesses are fairly mild. The only people to get severe CMV infection are some babies born with the virus and people who don't have good immunity, such as people with cancer or with AIDS.

How do you catch CMV?

CMV is a very common virus and is spread from a person with active CMV infection to a person who is "susceptible" to the virus. The mode of spread is by direct contact with secretions containing the virus e.g. saliva or other respiratory droplets. In general terms, "susceptible" people are people

who have never been infected by the virus before.

CMV can also cross the placenta so some babies can be born with congenital CMV infection, but the incidence of this is uncommon in Australia. Congenitally infected infants excrete the CMV in high amounts in the urine, which is therefore a potential source of infection (eg. from a wet nappy).

Other ways of catching infection are less common. Children in day cares are at risk of catching the virus. Parents of these children who have never had CMV infection before are also at risk of catching the virus from this child. People who work as carers in child care centres are particularly at risk of catching CMV infection. Hospital staff are no more likely than anyone else in the community to be infected.

Can CMV infection be prevented?

The best way to avoid catching CMV infection is by ALWAYS washing your hands before and after caring for babies and children. There is no vaccine against CMV.

What is congenital CMV infection?

A baby with congenital CMV infection is one who is born with the infection. The mother may have had her first ever infection (her primary infection) with CMV during the pregnancy or, rarely, she may have had CMV in the past and it "reactivated" or "came back" during pregnancy.

Fact Sheet

Cytomegalovirus



How severe is congenital CMV infection?

Most babies with congenital CMV infection are born perfectly normal and never have any problems. About one-in-ten infected children will develop deafness, usually while they are toddlers. Occasionally, babies with congenital CMV infection are born with a purple rash, big liver and spleen, and a small head. These babies usually have long-term problems such as delay in their development, convulsions, deafness and poor vision. Some drugs are effective in treating CMV, but they have not been shown to cure the effects of congenital CMV infection.

Who can I talk to if I am worried about CMV?

Pregnant women may be scared of catching CMV or having a baby with congenital CMV. The issues and the blood tests are quite complicated. Talk to your family doctor and ask for a referral to a specialist in infectious diseases.

Remember

- Hand washing before and after handling babies and children is the best way to avoid catching CMV infection.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional
to make sure this information is right for your child.

This document was reviewed on Tuesday, 11 November 2003.

the
children's
hospital at Westmead

www.chw.edu.au

 **SYDNEY
CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL
RANDWICK**

www.sch.edu.au