

Understanding Cytomegalovirus (CMV)



What Is CMV?

Cytomegalovirus, or CMV, is a type of virus that is commonly found in humans. Anyone at any age can get CMV -- nearly 1 out of every 3 kids in the United States will get infected by the time they're 5, and over half of all people will by the time they're 40. Once you get CMV, it stays in your body. If you're a fairly healthy adult, you may not even know you've been infected.

CMV is spread from person to person through the body fluids -- blood, saliva, tears, urine, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk -- of someone who has an active infection.

This can happen by physical contact (including sexual activity), pregnancy, birth, breast milk, blood transfusions, and organ, bone marrow, or stem cell transplants. Casual contact, like hugging or holding hands, very rarely spreads CMV.

Types of CMV Infection

CMV infection can be:

- **Primary:** the first time you get CMV
- **Reinfection:** getting infected again with a different strain, or variety, of CMV
- **Reactivation:** an earlier CMV infection in your body becomes active again
- **Congenital:** CMV infection in a baby before birth due to the mother's primary infection, reinfection, or reactivation during pregnancy
- **Perinatal:** CMV infection in a baby from their mother during or after birth, including from breast milk

For most people, CMV can stay inactive, or dormant, in your body after a primary infection. But CMV can become active again (reactivation) if your immune system -- your body's natural defense system -- is weakened from taking certain medicines, during cancer treatment, when living with certain health conditions such as HIV, or after an organ, bone marrow, or stem cell transplant.

CMV Can Cause Serious Health Problems

Most adults who get a primary CMV infection will have no symptoms, or mild ones such as fatigue (tiredness), fever, sore throat, swollen glands, and muscle aches. But CMV can cause serious symptoms and complications (additional problems), especially for babies and people who have a weakened immune system. CMV can even be deadly, especially for those who've had an organ, stem cell, or bone marrow transplant.

Most babies born with congenital CMV will have no symptoms at birth, but serious complications can develop months or years later. Symptoms and complications of congenital CMV can include:

- Premature birth or low birth weight
- Pneumonia
- Yellow skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Rashes and/or purple spots or skin patches
- Liver and spleen problems
- Hearing or vision loss
- Seizures
- A small head (microcephaly)
- Growth or learning problems
- Cerebral palsy or trouble with muscle tone and coordination

For people who have a weakened immune system, many complications they may develop are due to inflammation (swelling) and can include problems with eyesight and vision, the digestive system (liver, stomach, intestines), lungs, brain and nerves, and skin.

Talking to Your Doctor

Talk to your doctor about getting tested for CMV, especially if you have symptoms and a weakened immune system or are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant. Your doctor may recommend getting tested, as well as certain prenatal tests (before your baby is born) if you're pregnant. Babies can also be tested, with the most accurate time being within 3 weeks after they're born. If your doctor thinks you may have a CMV infection, your baby should be tested as soon as possible.



Questions you can ask your doctor about CMV can include:

What should I know about CMV?

Is there anything I should know if I have a weakened immune system?

What about if I'm pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or have a baby?

Are there any CMV symptoms that I should look out for?

Where can I find more information and resources?