



What is Encephalitis?

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Encephalitis is inflammation of the brain. The inflammation is caused either by an infection invading the brain (infectious); or through the immune system attacking the brain in error (post-infectious / autoimmune encephalitis).

Encephalitis is different from meningitis. Meningitis means inflammation of the protective layers that cover the brain. Sometimes patients have both meningitis and encephalitis and this is called meningoencephalitis.

Symptoms

The types of symptoms seen in encephalitis reflect the specific areas of the brain affected by inflammation. The range of symptoms and their rate of development vary widely and can make the diagnosis of encephalitis difficult.

Encephalitis frequently begins with a 'flu-like illness or headache. Typically more serious symptoms follow hours to days later. The most serious finding is an alteration in level of consciousness. This can range from mild confusion or drowsiness, to loss of consciousness and coma.

Other symptoms include a high temperature, seizures (fits), aversion to bright lights, inability to speak or control movement, sensory changes, neck stiffness, or uncharacteristic behaviour.

Some people may also experience hallucinations and vivid nightmares during the acute period of the encephalitis. These can be very distressing for the person concerned and the family who may witness their distress. This phase usually ceases as the inflammation and swelling of the brain subsides.

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