

I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CYTOMEGALOVIRUS

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What is cytomegalovirus?

Cytomegalovirus (CMV) is a common virus that affects people of all ages. CMV belongs to the herpes family. Other viruses in this family include cold sores (herpes simplex type 1), genital herpes (herpes simplex type 2), glandular fever (Epstein-Barr virus) as well as shingles and chicken pox (varicella zoster).

Is CMV common?

CMV infection is very common. In Australia 50% of the population will have been infected by adulthood. Most will never know they have come into contact with the virus.

Is CMV infection serious?

The virus can affect any of the major organs of the body such as the brain, eye, lung, stomach and intestines. The majority of people who become infected – if healthy to start with – remain well and are unaware of the infection, or they will have very minor symptoms, similar to that of a sore throat or a cold. CMV infection can be much more serious in people who have a weakened immune system, for example from cancer or an organ transplant.

Is it a concern for pregnant women?

CMV infection can be serious for pregnant women who have not previously been in contact with CMV. The virus can be passed on to the developing baby. The resulting infection is called congenital CMV. Congenital CMV can be life-threatening or cause long-term development disabilities, particularly deafness.

How can a person become infected with CMV?

CMV can be transmitted through contact with body fluids such as blood, urine, faeces, saliva and genital fluids. CMV is only transmissible when the virus is active. In the majority of the population, CMV remains inactive. Once a person has contracted CMV, they will have the virus for life.

How does the Blood Service prevent CMV being transmitted through blood transfusion?

The Blood Service selectively screens blood donors for CMV. Donations from donors who have not been infected with CMV (CMV negative donors) are primarily used for vulnerable patients such as pregnant mothers, babies and those with weakened immune systems.



In addition to screening, the Blood Service also ensures that all blood components have the white cells removed (a process called leucodepletion). CMV is generally found in white cells rather than just floating in plasma, so leucodepletion offers a high level of safety in preventing CMV transmission.

BLOOD FACT

The name cytomegalovirus means 'big cell virus' because infection causes massive enlargement in affected cells