

Quick Facts

About... Meningococcal Disease

What is Meningococcal Disease?

Neisseria meningitidis bacteria are found in the nose and throat of 10 – 15% of healthy adults. Rarely, the bacteria can enter areas of the body where bacteria are normally not found, such as the blood or fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and cause a severe, life-threatening infection (“invasive disease”) known as meningococcal disease.

How is Meningococcal Disease spread?

The disease is not spread by casual contact or by attending the same work or school setting. *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria are spread from person to person *only through* direct contact with an infected person’s nose or throat secretions, including saliva, 1 week before the onset of symptoms. Some common ways the bacteria can be spread from an infected person are:

- Living the same household
- Kissing on the lips
- Sharing drinks from the same container (glasses, cups, water bottles)
- Sharing eating with utensils (forks and spoons)
- Sharing a toothbrush, cigarettes or lipstick

Preventive antibiotic therapy is recommended for individuals identified to be close contacts of someone who is sick with the disease.

Who is at risk for Meningococcal Disease?

Young infants and students attending high school or college and military recruits are more likely to get the disease. Individuals with a weakened immune system are also at higher risk for the disease as well as those who live in crowded dwellings or have household exposure to cigarette smoke.

What are the signs of being sick with Meningococcal Disease?

Symptoms of meningococcal disease include:

- Fever (abrupt onset)
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Skin rash that appears as bruising or bleeding under the skin
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light

In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify but may include:

- Fever
- Fretfulness or irritability
- Poor appetite
- Difficulty in waking the baby

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

If you have any of the above symptoms, it is important to seek medical attention immediately. An infected person may become sick within a few hours of developing symptoms and early diagnosis. Your health care provider may collect blood or perform a spinal tap to obtain spinal fluid to see if meningococcal bacteria are present.

How can Meningococcal Disease be treated?

Meningococcal disease is treated with several different types of antibiotics, and early treatment may reduce the risk of complications or death from the disease. A 24-hour course of antibiotic therapy reduces a person's likelihood of spreading the bacteria. Supportive care in an intensive care unit may be necessary for those with severe infection and surgery may be needed to remove damaged tissue and stop the spread of infection.

How is Meningococcal Disease prevented?

Meningococcal disease can be prevented by good hygiene. Cover the nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, throw away used tissues, and wash hands often. Do not share eating or drinking utensils with anyone.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent this disease?

There are two vaccines that protect against most types of this disease. See your health care provider about which one is right for you. A dose of meningococcal vaccine is recommended for children and adolescents 11 through 18 years of age. Meningococcal vaccine is also recommended for other people at increased risk for meningococcal disease:

- College freshmen living in dormitories
- U. S. military recruits
- Travelers to countries where meningococcal disease is common, such as parts of Africa
- Anyone with a damaged spleen, or whose spleen has been removed
- Persons with certain medical conditions that affect their immune system (check with your physician)
- Microbiologists who are routinely exposed to meningococcal bacteria

For information on the availability of meningococcal vaccine contact your family physician or local health department. Revaccination after 5 years may be indicated for certain at-risk individuals.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Diseases and Control Prevention (CDC) meningitis website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/about/index.html>

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