Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a rare, but very serious illness caused by a type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. Even if treated quickly, meningococcal disease can cause long-term problems or be deadly. Getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent meningococcal disease.



Meningococcal Disease Can Lead to Meningitis or Bloodstream Infection

Meningococcal disease has two common outcomes – meningitis and bloodstream infection. These infections typically appear within 3 to 7 days after being exposed to the bacteria. Both of these conditions are very serious and can be deadly. In fatal cases, deaths can occur in as little as a few hours. People who recover from meningococcal disease can have lifelong complications, such as loss of limb(s), deafness, nervous system problems, or brain damage.

Meningitis

When someone has meningococcal meningitis, the tissue covering the brain and spinal cord becomes infected and swells. Symptoms of meningococcal meningitis include sudden onset of **fever**, **headache**, and **stiff neck**. There can be additional symptoms, such as:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Confusion

In babies, these symptoms can be difficult to notice or may not be there at all. Instead, a baby may appear slow or inactive, be irritable, vomit, or feed poorly.

Bloodstream Infection

When someone has a meningococcal bloodstream infection, the bacteria can enter the bloodstream and multiply, damaging the walls of the blood vessels and causing bleeding into the skin and organs. Symptoms may include:

- Fever or cold chills
- Tiredness (fatigue)
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Cold hands and feet
- Severe aches or pain in the muscles, joints, chest, or belly (abdomen)
- Rapid breathing
- A dark purple rash

Meningococcal disease is a very serious illness that requires immediate medical care.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases

Certain People are at Increased Risk for Meningococcal Disease

Babies, teens, and young adults have higher rates of meningococcal disease than people of other ages do. Other factors, such as having certain medical conditions or traveling to certain countries, can increase your risk for getting this disease, no matter how old you are. **Talk to your healthcare professional to see if you or your child is at increased risk for meningococcal disease**.

Meningococcal Disease is Spread from Person to Person

The bacteria that cause meningococcal disease are spread by exchanging respiratory and throat secretions (saliva or spit) during close (for example, coughing or kissing) or lengthy contact, especially if living in the same household. Fortunately, these bacteria are much harder to spread than viruses that cause the common cold or the flu.

Meningococcal Disease is Very Serious but Treatable

Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics (medicine that kills bacteria in the body). It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible. However, about 1 to 2 out of every 10 people who get meningococcal disease will die from the infection, even with quick and appropriate treatment. **If you think you or your child has meningococcal disease, seek medical care right away**.

Who Should Get Vaccinated Against Meningococcal Disease?

- All preteens and teens
- People 2 months old or older with certain medical conditions that affect the immune system
- Microbiologists who routinely work with *N. meningitidis*
- People 2 months old or older who are traveling to certain countries
- People 2 months old or older at risk because of an outbreak in their community

There are two types of vaccines that help protect against meningococcal disease. Most people who get a meningococcal vaccine do not have any serious problems with it. Side effects are usually mild and go away on their own within a few days, but serious reactions are also possible. **Talk to your healthcare professional about which vaccines you or your child may need.**



When Do Teenagers Need to be Vaccinated?

All preteens and teens should get vaccinated against meningococcal disease.

Preteens

All 11 to 12 year olds should receive one dose of a meningococcal conjugate vaccine that helps protect against four types (serogroups) of the bacteria: A, C, W, and Y.

Teens and Young Adults

Teens should receive a booster dose of a meningococcal conjugate vaccine when they are 16 years old to continue having protection during the years (16 through 23 years) when they are most at risk for getting meningococcal disease. Teens and young adults (16 through 23 year olds) may also be vaccinated with a serogroup B meningococcal vaccine, preferably when they are between 16 and 18 years old.