

Meningococcal Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation (swelling) of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It is sometimes referred to as spinal meningitis. Many different organisms including bacteria, viruses, fungi, and toxins can cause it.

Meningococcal meningitis is a more severe form of the illness caused by bacteria. It can be treated with antibiotics when given during early stages of the illness.

Who is at risk?

Meningococcal disease is mainly a disease of very small children under 5 years of age, young adults between the ages of 15 to 25, international travelers, and people with certain medical conditions. Although anyone can get the disease, at any given time 5% to 10% of the population carries the bacteria in their nose or throat without symptoms. On rare occasions it will cause illness. Most adults have developed immunity or natural protection against the bacteria.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal meningitis?

The early symptoms of meningococcal meningitis may look like those caused by other viruses such as a bad cold.

More severe symptoms may develop over several hours or may take up to 1 to 2 days, and may include:

- High fever
- Sudden onset of a severe headache
- Stiff neck which is painful when putting chin to chest
- Drowsiness, irritability, or confusion
- Nausea and vomiting
- Difficulty looking into bright lights
- Pinpoint red skin rash (later sign of the illness)

See a physician **immediately** if you develop these symptoms.

How is meningococcal meningitis spread?

The bacteria that cause meningococcal meningitis are not as contagious as illnesses such as the common cold or the flu. They are not spread by casual contact or by breathing the air where an infected person with meningitis has been.

The illness is spread by direct contact with saliva and/or nasal secretions from an infected person. This could include coughing, kissing, sneezing, or sharing drinks, utensils, cigarettes, or lipstick.

A person can be contagious for up to 10 days before showing signs of illness and until 24 to 48 hours after starting an antibiotic drug. A person with meningococcus meningitis should stay home until 24 to 48 hours after starting appropriate antibiotic treatment.

How can you prevent catching meningococcal meningitis?

Help prevent the spread of the disease by not sharing anything that may have saliva on it. For example,

- Do not share beverage containers or eating utensils, drinking straws, etc.
- Do not share lipstick, cigarettes, toothbrushes, or take bites out of other people's food.
- Sport teams should not share water bottles or mouth guards.
- Do not share musical instruments with mouthpieces.

Talk to your family physician or your local public health about meningitis vaccination.

Thorough hand washing is still the single most important way to prevent the spread of any disease. Remember to wash your hands often.

If you have questions about meningococcal meningitis, please call
1-800-265-7293 ext. 4752.