

Meningococcal Disease (Spinal meningitis, meningococemia, Neisseria meningitis)

(General Information
Fact Sheet

Epidemiology Department

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis*. This bacteria can infect the blood and/or the covering of the brain and spinal cord. Infection of the blood is called septicemia. Infection of the covering of the brains and spinal cord is called meningitis.

Who is at risk for getting meningococcal disease?

Anyone in the general population. Disease is more frequently identified in infants and young children, refugees, household contacts of cases, military recruits, college freshmen (who live in dormitories), and people exposed to active and/or passive tobacco smoke.

How is this disease spread?

Meningococcal disease spreads by contact with the saliva or respiratory droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. Many people carry the bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Although people can carry the bacteria without becoming ill, people ill with infection in their blood may have fever, nausea, vomiting, and a rash; while persons ill with meningitis will have fever, intense headache, nausea, vomiting, and stiff neck. It is important to seek care from a physician as soon as possible if these symptoms appear. Meningococcal disease may cause death if not treated promptly.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear 2 to 10 days after infection, but usually within 3 to 4 days.

How long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

From the time a person is first infected until the germ is no longer present in discharges from the nose and throat, he or she may spread the disease. The bacteria usually disappears from the nose and throat of the infected person within twenty four hours after the start of antibiotic therapy.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Antibiotics are used to treat infections with the bacteria.

Should people who have been around a person infected with meningococcal disease be treated?

Household members, daily playmates, and close friends of infected persons need to ask their doctor about antibiotics. Persons who have had casual contact such as occurs in a regular classroom, office or factory setting usually do not need treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

Presently, there is a vaccine that will protect against some of the sub-types of meningococcus. Vaccine is not generally recommended for use in the general population, but may be recommended for persons and/or groups at high risk for infection, such as college freshmen. For more information, contact your local or State Department of Health.

What can be done to stop the spread of meningococcal disease?

Anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms should cover their mouth and noses with disposable paper tissues (kleenex) when sneezing or coughing. Persons with fever, cold or flu-like symptoms should avoid crowded settings and not visit in hospitals.