

Meningococcal disease (bacterial meningitis)

What is meningococcal meningitis?

Meningococcal meningitis (*Neisseria meningitidis*) is a severe invasive bacterial infection. Meningitis is an inflammation of the lining (meninges) that surround the brain and spinal cord. The bacteria can also infect the blood (septicemia).

Other types of bacteria that cause meningitis: *Haemophilus influenzae type b* (Hib meningitis) and *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcal meningitis).

What are the symptoms?

The average time period from exposure to symptom onset is 1 - 10 days (average is usually 2-3 days):

- High fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck and back
- Rash
- Extreme tiredness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Mental confusion
- Bulging soft spot on infants head
- Progression to unresponsiveness and coma, if untreated

How long is a person contagious?

A person is capable of transmitting the bacteria from the time they are first infected and for 24 hours after starting an effective antimicrobial treatment.

How is it spread?

The disease is spread person-to-person by direct contact of respiratory (nose) and throat (mouth) secretions (kissing, coughing, sneezing, drinking out of the same cup, sharing eating utensils, sharing cigarettes, etc) of an infected person.

Meningococcal bacteria cannot live for more than a few minutes outside the body; therefore, the disease is not spread as easily as the common cold or flu. Also, the bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

How is meningococcal disease treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important that treatment be started early in the course of disease to reduce the risk of serious complications or death.

Can you get meningitis more than once?

Yes. Meningitis can be caused by different subtypes of the meningococcal bacterium, therefore, even being vaccinated or having had the disease will not protect you against these other sources of infection.

Is there a vaccine available?

Yes, there are vaccines against the most common strains of meningitis in the United States. Check with your physician for the most current recommendations.

(Note: Routine vaccination is not recommended for children aged 2-10 years and adults aged >55 years who are not identified as being at increased risk for meningococcal disease.)

There are also vaccines against Hib and many types of *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

How can I prevent the spread of meningitis?

Vaccination is the best defense against bacterial meningitis. Practice good hygiene by washing hands and covering coughs and sneezes. Do not share eating utensils, drink containers, lip stick, or tobacco products. Cases should be immediately reported to the health department to assure follow-up of close contacts and recognize outbreaks.

For further information visit:

<http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html>

**Promptly report meningitis cases to
Saint Louis County Department of Health
by calling
314 615 1630**