



# THE FACTS: *Bacterial Meningitis*

(Meningococcal Meningitis, Meningococemia, Meningococcal Disease)

## What is It?

One of the bacteria that may cause meningitis is a meningococcal organism called *Neisseria meningitidis*. It is a very serious disease. The bacteria enter the body through the nose and throat and infect the bloodstream (meningococemia), and the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningococcal meningitis). Fortunately, very few people are at risk for it, even when exposed. Antibiotics and possibly a vaccine are recommended as a preventive measure to those people identified as having had close personal contact, or who have been exposed to nose and mouth secretions of people who have become ill. (Please see the fact sheets on antibiotic use and meningococcal vaccine).

## How is Meningococcal Disease Spread?

The bacteria that cause this infection can be found in the nose and throats of about 10% of the general population. The vast majority never develop the disease. For unknown reasons, the bacteria may infect the individual themselves and/or the person may spread it to others through infected droplets, by coughing and sneezing. It can also be spread through the saliva of an infected person when sharing items such as; cigarettes, lipstick, water bottles, toothbrushes, food or beverages. Health care workers not wearing face protection (masks, face shield) may be exposed if suctioning or intubating an infected person.

## What are the Symptoms?

- Someone with meningitis will become very sick. It may take one or two days for meningitis to develop or it can take a matter of hours. Symptoms of meningitis include fever, feeling generally unwell, headache, vomiting and stiff neck. Persons with this disease may become drowsy, excited or confused. Sometimes a body rash develops. **Meningitis is very unpredictable! Not every person will have all of these symptoms. A physician should see contacts and other individuals who develop a fever with symptoms of meningitis as soon as possible.**

## How Can Meningococcal Disease be Prevented?

- Household and close contacts of affected cases should see their physician regarding possible antibiotic treatment to prevent the illness. Depending on the type of *Neisseria meningitidis*, a vaccine may also be recommended. (Please see fact sheets on uses of antibiotics and vaccine for meningococcal disease)
- Preventive medication is not routinely recommended for health care workers except those with intimate exposure (such as occurs during mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, intubation or suctioning) before antibiotic therapy was begun and if they were not wearing face protection (mask/face shield). Casual contacts such as coworkers or classmates do not need preventive antibiotics or vaccine
- Cover one's mouth when coughing or sneezing, throw away any used tissues and **wash hands**. Do not share anything that has been in one's mouth.

**For Further Information Contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318  
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext 8318.**

