



Thunder Bay District  
Health Unit

# THE FACTS: *Meningitis*

## What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Many different germs cause the infection. Some of these are viruses and some are bacteria.

There are two main types of meningitis: viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis. The symptoms of both are so similar that medical tests are needed to tell the difference.

- **Viral meningitis** is the most common and least serious. It may be caused by a wide variety of common viruses. Antibiotics have no effect. People with viral meningitis almost always get completely well without treatment.
- **Bacterial meningitis** is an extremely serious bacterial infection. It has the potential to cause long term complications, such as deafness or brain injury. It can also cause death. Bacterial meningitis requires immediate treatment with antibiotics. This form of meningitis is fairly rare. The two most common types of bacterial meningitis are meningococcal and pneumococcal.

## 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 a 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.**

## How is Meningitis Spread?

Meningitis is spread when people cough, sneeze or kiss. It can also be spread through saliva of an infected person when sharing items such as; cigarettes, lipstick, cups, water bottles, toothbrushes, mouth guards, food or beverages.

## How is the Spread of Meningitis Prevented?

- In general, people should not share anything that has been in their mouth.
- Frequent handwashing, covering one's mouth when coughing or sneezing and throw away any used tissues.
- If a person has had close contact with someone who is infected with bacterial meningitis, antibiotics may be required to prevent infection.
- Vaccination. There is no vaccine that protects against all causes of meningitis. Immunization against childhood diseases helps to eliminate many of the causes of meningitis. Vaccines for meningococcal meningitis are used when there is an outbreak in a community.

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

