

Meningococcal Disease, Invasive

What is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis*. This bacteria is found in the throat and nose in 10 percent of healthy individuals. In rare instances, the bacteria can overcome the body's natural defenses and cause serious disease. The two serious forms of the disease are a blood infection called meningococemia, and an infection of the lining of the brain called 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 disease spreads through saliva by close face-to-face contact, usually by kissing or sharing food, drink, musical instruments, water bottles, cigarettes or other things that have been in the mouth of a person with the bacteria. It can also spread through infected droplets, by coughing and sneezing. Health care workers not wearing face protection (masks, face shield) may be exposed if suctioning or intubating an infected person.

What are the symptoms of Meningococcal Disease?

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 sudden fever, feeling generally unwell, severe 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 (Meningococcal C-Conjugate Vaccine). This routine immunization is provided for *Neisseria meningitidis* during childhood years. 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 co-workers 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** (soap and water for at least 15 seconds). Do not share anything that has been in one's mouth.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns

***For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
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