



Meningitis (meningococcal) - General Fact Sheet

What is meningococcal meningitis?

Meningococcal meningitis is an infection caused by a bacterium that causes inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord.

How is the germ meningococcus spread?

The meningococcus germ is spread by direct close contact with nose or throat discharges of an infected person. Many people carry this germ in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is more common in infants and children.

When do most cases of bacterial meningitis occur?

Although cases can occur at any time during the year, the "season" for bacterial meningitis is late winter and early spring.

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

- High fever, headache and stiff neck are common in anyone over the age of 2 years.
- Symptoms can develop over several hours or 1 to 2 days.
- Severe malaise (not feeling well)
- Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion and sleepiness.
- In newborns and small infants, symptoms may include inactivity, irritability, vomiting or poor feeding.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear two to 10 days after exposure, but usually within five days.

When and for 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 transmit the disease.

Can meningitis be treated?

Early recognition and treatment of anyone exposed to meningococcus is extremely important to prevent serious illness or death. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. Identification of the type of bacteria is important for selection of correct antibiotics.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). They are not spread by casual contact or by breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Should people who have been in contact with a diagnosed case of meningococcal meningitis be treated?

Only people who have been in close contact (household members, intimate contacts, health care personnel performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation) need to be considered for preventive treatment. Casual contact as might occur in a regular classroom; office or factory setting is not usually significant enough to cause concern.

What are some prevention tips?

Close contacts in the same household or school should be watched for early signs of the disease as soon as the first case is diagnosed. Preventive measures such as washing your hands before and after changing a diaper or using the bathroom and other good hygiene habits should always be used.

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Source: Ohio Department of Health
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