



MENINGOCOCCAL INFECTION

What is meningococcal infection?

Meningococcal infection is caused by a bacterium known as meningococcus. Many people (about 10% of the population) carry the bacteria at the back of their throat or nose without any ill effects. In rare instances meningococci overcome the body's natural defenses and cause serious diseases, including *meningitis* (infection of the lining of the brain) and *meningococemia*, a widespread infection involving the blood and multiple organs.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal infection?

Meningitis symptoms may include high fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, dislike of bright lights (photophobia), confusion, drowsiness, a small purplish skin rash, irritability or excessive crying in young children. These symptoms can develop over several hours or they may take one to two days. In people with **meningococemia** without meningitis, the headache, neck stiffness and photophobia may be absent but the rash may be extensive, and may be associated with bleeding.

How is meningococcal infection spread?

The infection is spread to other persons through direct contact with droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person. Kissing, coughing, sneezing, and sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, water bottles, cigarettes or lipstick can spread the disease. In some cases, persons may be carrying the bacteria and not be affected by it, but they may still pass it on to other persons who could become ill. The infection is not acquired by simply being in the same room as an infected person or breathing air where an infected person has been.

Who can get meningococcal infection?

Although the disease can occur at any age, the highest risk for meningococcal infection is among children under one year of age with the next highest risk among teenagers 15 to 19 years of age.

Can meningococcal infection be treated?

Yes, there are effective antibiotics for the treatment of meningococcal infection. Treatment should be started as soon as infection is suspected.

How can meningococcal infection be prevented?

Most cases of meningococcal infection are unexpected and cannot be prevented. However, if you learn that someone has meningococcal infection, you can reduce your risk of infection by not sharing drinks, eating utensils, lipsticks, cigarettes, etc. with anyone. Regular and frequent hand washing with soap and warm water is also a good practice.

If you have been in direct contact with a person ill with meningococcal infection, you should see a doctor to receive the recommended antibiotic. This will help prevent the development of the disease in you. Although this antibiotic is very effective at preventing the disease, it is important that a doctor be consulted if disease symptoms develop while you are on the antibiotic. A person with meningococcal infection should be excluded from schools, daycares, workplace or other public settings.

Vaccines are available to prevent many types of meningococcal disease. The publicly-funded vaccine is available for persons with certain health problems. Persons wishing to be vaccinated but who are not eligible for publicly-funded vaccine should consult their family physician.

For additional information, contact your regional Public Health office or your family doctor.

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