

# A Message To Parents About Meningococcal Disease

## What is Meningococcal Disease?

This disease includes two types of infection: infection of the lining of the brain (meningococcal meningitis) and infection of the blood (called meningococcaemia). Both are serious infections that must be treated **immediately** by your doctor.

## What is Meningitis?

This is the name of **any** infection of the lining of the brain. Many different types of germs can cause meningitis. One kind of meningitis (Hib meningitis) can be prevented by a vaccination given to infants at age 2, 4, 6, and 18 months. The meningitis that we are talking about here (meningococcal meningitis) is caused by a different germ.

## What Causes It?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacterium (a germ). This germ is around us all the time. Healthy people may have it in their nose or throat, and it usually does not cause disease. In some rare cases, the germ can get into the blood or brain and cause serious illness.

## How do you get it?

This germ has to be carried in saliva, or droplets from the nose of a person who has the germ, into the mouth or nose of another person. Sneezing, coughing, kissing, or sharing cigarettes, food, drinks or other things that contain saliva, can all help to pass the germ from one person to another. It will take from two to ten (but usually three to four) days; from the time the germ gets into a person's mouth or nose, for the person to become sick.

## Who Can Get It?

Anyone can get the germ that causes meningococcal disease, but very few people will actually get sick. Most people will get the germ when they are children and will develop protection by the time they are teenagers. These people will have life-long protection. The bacteria, which cause the disease, exist everywhere, and many healthy people carry the bacteria in their nose or throat for long periods of time. This does not cause them any harm, but they may be able to spread the germ to others. It is only rarely that the germ causes the serious disease.

We know that when there is **close contact** with a case, such as in a family, childcare, dormitory setting, that people are at greater risk. Usually there is no increased spread within schools or at recreational or social events. **Casual contact** such as being in the same classroom or sitting at a table with an infected person does not increase the risk of infection.

## What Are The Signs Of Meningococcal Disease?

Severe headache, vomiting, and stiff neck are the most common signs of meningococcal disease. High fever and irritability are signs in a very young child. If there is infection in the blood, a purplish skin rash, which looks like bruising, may also occur. By the time this rash appears the infection is very serious and the person must be treated as soon as possible.

### **What Happens When A Case Of Meningococcal Disease Occurs?**

When a case of meningococcal disease occurs the sick person is treated with antibiotics in hospital. Meningococcal disease can be cured with antibiotics. This treatment is given in hospital and should be started as soon as possible. People who have been in **close contact** with someone who has the disease are given an antibiotic called rifampin. Public health staff will make sure that all persons who need rifampin will get it. The effect of this antibiotic will last for several days. It is important that everyone who is given rifampin should take it as directed. If there is evidence of spread within a particular group, such as two or more cases within a school, family or other group, rifampin may be offered to all members of that group to prevent further spread of the disease. Vaccination may be offered to prevent future outbreaks of disease in a group where disease appears to be spreading more easily.

### **What Should I Do If I Think My Child Has Meningococcal Disease?**

The disease can happen very quickly. If you think that your child has meningococcal disease, see your family doctor or go to your local hospital immediately. If you think that your child is not improving after a visit, then go back to the doctor again.

### **How Can I Prevent It?**

Good (personal) hygiene practices can help prevent meningococcal disease. Do not share forks, spoons, glasses, cigarettes, lipstick, food, sports water bottles, or other items that may contain saliva. Covering coughs and sneezes to stop the spread of any germs.

### **My Child's Best Friend Has Meningococcal Disease: What Should I Do?**

Public/community health nurses and doctors will get the names of all close contacts and make sure they are treated. Inform public health staff, or your doctor, if your child has been in close contact with someone who has the disease. The medication, taken as instructed, will protect your child.

### **My Child's Classmate Has Meningococcal Disease: What Should I Do?**

Be alert for any sign of illness in your child. This disease is not normally spread through schools. Keeping your child out of school will not stop the germ from spreading and will not protect your child. There is vaccine available for some types of meningococcal disease but it does not protect against one of the commonest types. The vaccine is used only in certain high-risk situations such as for travel to foreign countries where there are epidemics, and in military barracks where there is prolonged close contact. It is sometimes used in specific outbreaks where there is increased spread of the disease among a group of people. In normal situations, with one or two cases occurring in an area, vaccination is not recommended.

### **My Child Will Be Visiting An Area Where There Have Been Cases Of Meningococcal Disease: Should I Be Concerned?**

Persons planning to travel should consult their local Health and Community Services office at least 4 weeks before travelling.

For additional information and services contact Health and Community Services, listed in the white pages of your telephone book.