Meningococcal Infections (including Meningitis)

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by a very common bacterium, or germ, called meningococcus. There are many types of this germ and all can cause severe illness.

Most people who come in contact with the germ do not have symptoms and do not become sick. Sometimes this germ can overcome the body's defences and cause illness. For some people (especially adolescents, children and those with certain medical problems) the germ can cause:

- meningococcal meningitis – an infection that affects the spinal fluid and the lining around the brain. Other bacteria and viruses can also cause meningitis.

- meningococcemia or meningococcal septicemia – an infection of the blood.

- other diseases such as pneumonia.

About nine out of 10 times, antibiotics successfully treat this infection. However, people may have a permanent disability such as hearing loss, paralysis or the loss of part or all of a limb. The infection can cause death.

Meningococcal disease is not new. There are cases of meningococcal infection in Canada and the rest of the world every year. In Manitoba we usually have fewer than 10 cases per year.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Some people carry the meningococcal germ in their nose and throat. They can pass it to others by contact with the droplets from their nose or mouth.

To catch the infection, you must have very close contact with someone infected with the meningococcal germ. It does not spread as easily as other infections, such as the common cold or flu.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms of meningococcal infection may include:

- fever,

- headache,

- nausea and sometimes vomiting,

- weakness and drowsiness,

- stiff neck, and

- reddish-purple, tiny spots or a bruise-like skin rash.

Young children may also be sleepy, irritable or cry excessively.

In winter, other viruses cause some of these same symptoms. Meningococcal infections are usually more severe than these other viruses, and may get worse quickly. **If you have these symptoms, see your doctor, health clinic or closest emergency room immediately.**

How can meningococcal infection be prevented?

When a case of meningococcal infection is reported, public health nurses will notify people who have been in contact with the nasal or mouth secretions of the infected person. They will be offered a special antibiotic to prevent them from becoming ill. Even though the antibiotic is very good at preventing disease, **it is very important to contact your doctor if you become ill after contact with a case of meningococcal infection.**

You may reduce the spread of this germ if you:

- wash your hands frequently;
- keep your hands away from your mouth and nose;
- cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough;
- use only your own plates, knives, forks and glasses;
- avoid sharing things like cigarettes, water bottles, lip gloss and glasses or cups; and
- reduce casual kissing.

Is there a vaccine to protect against meningococcal disease?

There is a vaccine that protects against some strains of meningococcal infection. It does not work in children younger than two years of age.

The following people (over age two) are at an increased risk of infection or of having a more severe meningococcal infection, and should get the vaccine:

- people without a spleen or a spleen that is not working properly due to disease;
- some people who work with the meningococcal bacteria in laboratories; and
- people who are living in, or travelling overseas to countries at high risk for meningococcal disease.

Sometimes, immunization may be recommended if there is an increase in the number of cases of disease in certain age groups or communities.

For more information:

Talk to your doctor, public health nurse or call Health Links, in Winnipeg: 788-8200 or toll-free: 1-888-315-9257