

FACT SHEET

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

(Spinal meningitis, Meningococemia, Neisseria meningitis)

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection of the blood and meninges (the thin covering of the brain and spinal cord). It is a relatively rare disease.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Infection with the bacteria can cause fever, headache, nausea, vomiting, rash, a stiff neck and occasionally death.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear 2 - 10 days after infection, but usually about 3 - 4 days after exposure.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease spreads by contact with mucus or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. Meningitis and septicemia (an infection of the blood) caused by *N. meningitidis* can be spread by direct contact with saliva, such as kissing or sharing items like eating utensils, drinks or cigarettes. Pneumonia caused by *N. meningitidis* can also be transmitted by droplets. Some people carry the bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone, but it is more common in infants, children and young adults.

How long is a person infectious?

A person may spread the disease from the time they are first infected until the germ is no longer present in discharge from the nose and throat. The bacteria usually disappear from the throat and nose 24 hours after appropriate antibiotics are started.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Antibiotics. Once the initial infection is treated, the person may also need another antibiotic to clear the bacteria from the nose and throat and reduce the chances of spreading it to others.

Can a person get this disease again?

Probably not.

Do infected people need to be excluded from school, work, or child care?

Yes, people with meningitis should be excluded from public places until a doctor says it is OK to return.

Should people who have been around a person infected with meningococcal disease be treated?

Household members, child care center attendees and staff, and close friends of infected persons need to ask their doctor about antibiotics. Persons who have had casual contact such as sitting or standing next to someone in a classroom, office or factory do not need treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

Yes. Two vaccines protecting against most strains of *N. meningitidis* are available. A dose of vaccine is recommended for persons 11-12 years of age or on entry into high school. A booster dose should be given at age 16 years. A student entering college should get a dose of vaccine if they received the vaccine more than 5 years before starting college or had never received one.

The vaccine is also recommended for travelers where the disease is common and certain high-risk individuals, including laboratory personnel who are exposed routinely to *N. meningitides*, college freshman living in dormitories, and military recruits. For more information, contact your physician or county health department.

What can be done to help prevent the spread of meningococcal disease?

Anyone with cold- or flu-like symptoms should cough or sneeze into a disposable tissue or into their sleeve. Do not share food, drink, eating utensils or cigarettes with others. Frequent handwashing is always helpful in reducing the chances of catching diseases.