

Information on Meningococcal Disease for Sharing

What is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is an infectious disease caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*, a bacterium that can live in the nose and throat of otherwise healthy persons. Although less than 15% of the population carry the germ at any one time, a very small portion of the total population are thought to be susceptible to the bacteria which can cause infection of the blood (meningococemia or the fluid around the brain (meningitis). Thus, it is rare for illness to develop.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Meningococcal Disease?

Symptoms of the disease are usually sudden and initially non-specific: fever, feeling generally unwell, headache, vomiting, and in some cases a stiff neck. People with this disease are visibly sick and may be confused, excited, or drowsy. Sometimes a reddish-purple rash that may look like pinpoint bruises appears. The rash is flat and smooth, does not itch, and may spread quickly once it starts. In rare cases, the symptoms are followed by lowered blood pressure, shock, delirium, sudden extreme weakness, coma, and death. Because the disease spreads quickly in the body, it is important to see a physician immediately if symptoms suggesting meningococcal disease are occurring.

How Does One Catch Meningococcal Disease?

The germ is spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat, such as kissing, coughing, sneezing, and sharing of cigarettes, drinks, and food.

Who is at Risk? What Needs to be Done for Those at High Risk?

Most people who come in contact with an infected person do not become sick. Contacts of infected persons in households and childcare centers are at the highest risk for becoming sick, especially children younger than two years. Individuals who have direct contact with saliva or secretions from the nose or throat of the infected person are also at increased risk. Throat cultures are not useful in determining who is at risk.

Persons who have direct contact with infected persons should consult their physicians and should receive specific antibiotic therapy promptly to help prevent the disease from occurring.

Most meningococcal disease occurs as sporadic or individual cases, but clusters of cases occasionally occur in school children and adolescents. When clusters of cases occur, in some instances, meningococcal vaccination is recommended for the group at risk, such as school children. Because it takes up to two weeks for persons to develop protection after vaccination, direct contacts also must receive antibiotic therapy to decrease the risk of early disease even if they are being vaccinated.

How Can the Risk of Catching Meningococcal Disease be Minimized?

Although not proven, the risk may be decreased by persons not sharing eating utensils, toothbrushes, and cigarettes, by not drinking from the same containers (sports teams should not share water bottles), and by not sharing foods.

Source: The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Paediatric Society encourage the reproduction of the 1995 "Information on Meningococcal Disease for Sharing" for noncommercial, educational purposes.

Courtesy of County of San Diego, Department of Health Services, Community Epidemiology.