About…Meningococcal Disease

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacteria that can infect the blood or cause an infection of the brain and spinal cord called meningitis. The bacteria can live in the nose and throat of some people, usually not causing illness. In a very small number of people, the bacteria pass to the blood or spinal fluid causing a very serious infection.

What are the signs of being sick with this disease?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone older than two years. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, confusion, and sleepiness. Some people's eyes may become sensitive to light. Newborns and small infants may not have any symptoms, or the child may have vomiting or only be tired or fussy. An infected person may become very sick within a few hours of developing symptoms and should seek medical help immediately.

How is it spread?

The bacteria are spread from person to person by direct contact with an infected person's nose or throat secretions, including saliva. Some common ways the bacteria can be spread are:

- kissing a person who is infected;
- sharing drinks from the same container (glasses, cups, water bottles) with someone who is infected;
- eating with utensils (forks and spoons) that have been used by an infected person; or
- sharing a toothbrush with an infected person.

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of the spinal fluid or blood. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important.

How is the disease treated?

Meningococcal disease can be treated with appropriate antibiotics. It is important that treatment begin early in the course of the illness to prevent serious complications or even death.

Who is at highest risk for getting the disease?

Babies and young adults, including middle and high school students and college freshmen living in dormitories, are more likely to get the disease. While individual students may become infected, outbreaks usually do not occur in school or workplace settings. People living in crowded places are at higher risk for infection. Persons with weakened immune systems are also more likely to be infected.

Can meningococcal disease be prevented?

Yes, the disease can be prevented by good hygiene. Cover the nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, throw away used tissues, and wash hands often. Also, do not share eating or drinking utensils.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent this disease?
Yes, there are two vaccines that protect against most types of this disease. See your health care provider about which one is right for you. **A dose of meningococcal vaccine is recommended for children and adolescents 11 through 18 years of age.** Meningococcal vaccine is also recommended for other people at increased risk for meningococcal disease:

- College freshmen living in dormitories
- U. S. military recruits
- Travelers to countries where meningococcal disease is common, such as parts of Africa
- Anyone with a damaged spleen, or whose spleen has been removed
- Persons with certain medical conditions that affect their immune system (check with your physician)

For additional information on meningococcal disease visit the Centers for Diseases and Control Prevention (CDC) website at:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_meningitis.htm or the Mayo Clinic website at:
http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/meningitis/DS00118

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