

Meningococcal Infection- Factsheet

What is a meningococcal infection?

A type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis* (also known as “meningococci”) cause meningococcal infections. A very small number of people exposed to these bacteria develop a serious illness from it, such as meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or bloodstream infections.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal infection?

Symptoms may include fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, sleepiness or confusion, and/or a characteristic skin rash. Symptoms of infection may appear 1 to 10 days after exposure, but usually within four days.

How are meningococcal infections spread?

Meningococci are spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat of an infected person. Spread is almost always by close contact with a person who is not ill (an asymptomatic carrier). Examples of close contact include kissing, or sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, cigarettes or toothbrushes. Casual contact such as takes place in a classroom or office setting is not usually enough to spread disease. Meningococci can only live for a few minutes on environmental surfaces such as tables, chairs, and clothing.

How long are people contagious?

A person may spread the bacteria from the time that the person is first infected until the bacteria are no longer in the person’s nose and throat. Meningococci usually disappear from the nose and throat within 24 hours after the start of proper antibiotics.

Who gets meningococcal infections?

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

What treatment is available for people with meningococcal infections?

Antibiotics are used to treat meningococcal infections. However, even with proper antibiotics about 10% of the people who have a meningococcal infection die and 20% have permanent complications, such as hearing loss, brain injury, or loss of a limb.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

People who have a meningococcal infection will most probably be in the hospital. Persons infected with meningococci may spread the bacteria until 24 hours after proper antibiotics were started.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting a meningococcal infection?

- If you have been in close contact with the ill person, you will need to receive preventive antibiotics. In general, close contacts are household members, intimate contacts, and close friends. In these persons, the taking an antibiotic can get rid of the bacteria from the

nose and throat. This lowers the chance for spreading the bacteria to others and may prevent illness.

- A vaccine is available that protects against certain strains of the bacteria. Vaccination is currently recommended for young adolescents at their routine preadolescent visit (11-12 years of age) as well as any unvaccinated adolescents at high school entry (15 years of age). It is also recommended for military recruits, college freshmen who are living in dormitories and persons with certain health conditions (e.g., damaged spleen.)
- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. Teach children to wash their hands too. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)
- Always cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze and then wash your hands.