

Meningococcal Disease - Factsheet

What is meningococcal disease?

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 invasive illness from it, such as meningitis (inflammation of the brain and spinal cord) or bloodstream infections.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

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 is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococci are spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat of an infected person. Examples of close contact include:

- Anyone with direct contact with the patient's oral secretions, such as a kissing partner
- People in the same household
- Roommates

Casual contact such as takes place in a classroom or office setting is not usually enough to spread disease

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 is at risk for meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but certain people are at increased risk. Infants, teens and young adults, and older adults are at increased risk. Certain medical conditions put people at increased risk for pneumococcal disease.

- Complement component deficiencies
- Functional and anatomic asplenia
- HIV infection

Where you work, live and travel can also increase risk.

- Microbiologists who work with bacteria
- College students
- Military recruits
- Travelers to the meningitis belt in sub-Saharan Africa

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

People who have a meningococcal infection will likely need hospital treatment. People infected with meningococci may spread the bacteria until 24 hours after proper antibiotics were started.

What treatment is available?

Antibiotics are used to treat meningococcal disease. Early diagnosis and treatment are especially important for invasive pneumococcal 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.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting a pneumococcal 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, taking an antibiotic can get rid of the bacteria from the nose and throat. This lowers the chance of 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 a booster dose at age 16. 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.