

Meningococcal Disease

Fact Sheet



What is meningococcal disease?

It is a serious illness caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis*. These bacteria can cause:

- infection of the lining of the brain and spine
- blood infection, and rarely
- pneumonia

How is it spread?

The bacteria are found in the nose and throat. About 10 percent of people carry it without getting sick. People spread meningococcal bacteria through respiratory and throat secretions (saliva or spit). Generally, it takes close or lengthy contact to spread these bacteria. Fortunately, they are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or the flu. People do not catch them through casual contact or by breathing air where someone with meningococcal disease has been.

People living in the same house or going to the same daycare as a person with the infection are at highest risk of catching the disease. These people are often offered medicine to prevent illness.

It is not usually spread by sharing a classroom or an office with someone who is sick. Persons infected with the bacteria can spread the disease to others from 7 days before symptoms start until 24 hours after effective treatment with antibiotics begins.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Signs and symptoms may include:

- high fever
- headache
- stiff neck
- vomiting
- rash

Symptoms usually appear within 4 days after exposure to the bacteria (range is from 1-10 days). Getting medical care and treatment right away is very important, as this is a serious illness.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics can be used to treat people with this disease. It is important that treatment be started early in the course of the disease.

What if a person has contact with someone with this infection?

Only people who have been in close contact might need preventive treatment. 'Close contact' individuals includes household members, intimate contacts, people performing "mouth to mouth", daycare center playmates or people who have kissed or shared foods or drink.

Close contacts that are identified should visit their healthcare provider as soon as possible to get a prescription for an antibiotic. The antibiotic should ideally be taken within 24 hours of last contact with the case or taken as soon as possible.

How is this disease diagnosed?

The bacteria are grown in a lab from a sample of blood or spinal fluid.

Who is at risk of developing this disease?

Anyone can get it, but it is more common in infants and children. Adolescents and first-year college students living in dorms are also at increased risk. Other risk factors include:

- living in close quarters, such as dorms
- people with certain medical conditions
- travel to sub-Saharan Africa

More information about risk factors for meningococcal disease can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/about/risk-factors.html>

Is there a vaccine to prevent it?

Yes, there are vaccines available in the U.S. to protect against disease. However, the vaccines cannot prevent all types of this disease. Contact your healthcare provider to find out if you or someone you know could benefit from this vaccine.

Who should get the vaccine?

Meningococcal vaccine recommendations are complex, and are continually updated. Please refer to the CDC website for up to date recommendations:

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/mening/public/index.html>

In summary, routine vaccination is recommended for:

- all children at age 11 or 12 years with a booster dose at 16 years of age
- all unvaccinated teens ages 13-18 years
 - those who receive their first dose of conjugate vaccine at or after age 16 years do not need a booster dose
- all teens **may** also be vaccinated with a serogroup B meningococcal vaccine, preferably at 16 through 18 years old.
- babies and children between the ages of 2 months and 10 years if they have specific medical conditions (see CDC website for list of conditions)
- certain groups of adults at increased risk for meningococcal disease (see CDC website for list of conditions)

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website: <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.