



Invasive Meningococcal Disease Fact Sheet

Meningococcal infection

Meningococcal infection (or meningococcal disease) is caused by a bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*, often referred to as meningococcus. There are 13 strains of meningococcus and five of these can be prevented by vaccines. Meningococcal infection is uncommon, and not easily spread, but it can cause serious complications, including:

- meningitis – an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord
- septicaemia – an infection of the blood
- infections in other parts of the body, such as in the joints.

Meningococcal infections can start suddenly and become extremely serious very quickly. They can cause life-long disabilities, or death in about one in 10 people affected.

If your child has meningococcal infection, early diagnosis and treatment with antibiotics is vital.

Signs and symptoms of meningococcal infection

Children may have one or more of these symptoms if they have meningococcal infection:

- high fever (temperature over 39°C)
- severe headache
- stiffness and pain in the neck, shoulders, back and other muscles
- skin rash (small bright red spots or purple spots or unexplained bruises) that does not turn skin-coloured (blanch) when you press on them with a finger
- dislike of bright lights (photophobia)
- lethargy, drowsiness or confusion
- nausea and vomiting.

In babies, the typical symptoms may be harder to detect, but they may include:

- a fever (temperature above 38°C)
- a high-pitched, moaning cry
- being irritable, agitated or unsettled
- refusing or not waking for feeds
- vomiting
- being difficult to wake, lethargic or floppy
- pale or blotchy skin
- skin rash (small bright red spots or purple spots or unexplained bruises) that does not turn skin-coloured (blanch) when you press on them with a finger

Symptoms will show up within two to 7 days (but usually about three to four days) after your child has been in contact with meningococcus. Symptoms often begin suddenly.





When to see a doctor

Anyone showing signs of meningococcal infection needs to immediately see a doctor. It is important to note that not all symptoms are necessarily present and that in the early stages; it can be very difficult to tell meningococcal disease apart from milder diseases. If your child is sent home by the doctor or hospital after some initial symptoms, but becomes worse or doesn't improve, seek urgent medical assistance.

Treatment for meningococcal infection

If your child has symptoms of meningococcal infection they will be treated in hospital with antibiotics. Early treatment with antibiotics is the key to saving their life and avoiding long-term disability.

How is meningococcal disease transmitted?

Meningococcal bacteria are very common and can live harmlessly in the back of the nose and throat. In some people, the bacteria move from the nose and throat and invade the body causing illness. At any time, 10% of the population can carry these bacteria without being aware of them.

Meningococcal bacteria are spread from one person to another by coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing. However, for transmission to occur there has to be prolonged or close contact. Even when this occurs, most people will not become ill because of natural immunity.

The bacteria cannot live longer than a few moments outside the human body, so they are not transmitted through objects such as clothing, bedding, toys or dishes.

Who is most at risk of getting meningococcal disease?

Persons considered at risk (close contacts) are usually those living in the same household, intimate contacts, or other persons closely involved in the care of affected cases. Having been on the same bus, talking to or sitting next to somebody infected or walking past an infected person is not considered a risk.

Even for close contacts, the risk of getting the disease is very low. Although meningococcal disease is infectious and can cause outbreaks, the majority of cases are isolated, with no link to any other cases.

Meningococcal meningitis can affect people of any age, gender or ethnicity. However it most commonly affects children under five years of age, particularly babies under the age of one. It's also common among teenagers aged 15 to 19.

What can one do to prevent infection?

The Public Health Authorities are notified of both suspected and confirmed cases of meningococcal disease. Preventive medicines can be given to the identified close contacts when prescribed by a doctor. In some circumstances a vaccine may also be given.

Close contacts are to seek immediate medical help if they develop symptoms suggestive of infection in the 7 days following contact with the case.





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There are also vaccines available that can be given at any time which offer protection against certain types of meningococcal bacteria. Consult your doctor for further information.

For further information on meningococcal disease, you may contact the Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Unit on tel: 23266145 Monday to Friday during office hours.

**PROMPT RECOGNITION AND
TREATMENT OF
MENINGOCOCCAL INFECTION
SAVES LIVES**



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