

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection of the blood and meninges (the thin covering of the brain and spinal cord). It is a relatively rare disease.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

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

How is this disease spread?

Meningococcal disease spreads by contact with mucus or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. Meningitis and septicemia caused by *N. meningitidis* can be spread by direct contact with saliva as when kissing, sharing eating utensils, drinks or cigarettes. Pneumonia caused by *N. meningitidis* can also be transmitted by droplets. Many people carry the bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Although most people can carry the bacteria without becoming ill, infection with the bacteria can cause fever, headache, nausea, vomiting, rash, a stiff neck and occasionally death.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear 2 to 10 days after infection, but usually within 3 to 4 days.

How long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

From the time a person is first infected until the germ is no longer present in discharges from the nose and throat, a person may spread the disease.

Can a person get this disease again?

Probably not.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Antibiotics such as penicillin, and ampicillin, are used to treat meningococcal disease. Once the initial infection is treated the case should also receive rifampin to clear the carrier state.

Should people who have been around a person infected with meningococcal disease be treated?

Household members, daycare center playmates, and close friends of infected persons need to ask their doctor about antibiotics. Persons who have had casual contact such as occurs in a regular classroom, office or factory setting usually do not need treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

Yes. There is a vaccine that will protect against four types of meningococcus. It is recommended only in special circumstances. For more information, contact your county health department.

What can be done to stop the spread of meningococcal disease?

Anyone with cold- or flu-like symptoms should cover their mouth and nose with disposable paper tissues (Kleenex) when sneezing or coughing. During outbreaks in schools, pregnant women and people with chronic red blood cell disorders should ask their doctor for advice before attending.

