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Meningococcal Disease Facts



What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. The bacteria are found in the nose and throat of about 10% of healthy people. But in some people, the bacteria can cause serious illness such as meningitis (inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord) or an infection of the blood.

What causes meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is quite rare in Canada. The bacteria are spread by direct contact with droplets from an infected person's mouth or nose. This can happen through sneezing, kissing or sharing eating utensils.

A person with meningococcal disease may spread the disease beginning several days before he/she becomes ill, until the bacteria are no longer in the droplets in their nose and throat, about 24 hours after antibiotics have been started.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms of meningococcal disease usually appear within two to ten days of being infected with the bacteria, but can appear within hours. Symptoms of meningococcal disease can be different for different people, but include a sudden high fever, headache, vomiting, stiff neck and a rash. Sensitivity to light, sleepiness and confusion may also occur. Symptoms may be hard to see in infants and the infant may only appear lethargic (no energy), irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease gets worse, patients of any age may have seizures. Meningococcal disease causes death in 8% to 15% of cases.

Who is most at risk for meningococcal disease?

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill. It is not well understood why only a few people develop serious illness.

Anybody can get meningococcal disease but it is most common in children under five, especially in children under one year of age. Youths aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 are the next highest risk groups. University students, especially those that live in dormitories, are at a slightly higher risk for meningococcal disease than other people of that age group. People with certain types of immune system disorders or those whose spleen has been damaged or removed are also at greater risk for meningococcal disease.

Anyone who has close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease is also at risk. This includes anyone living in the same house, children in the same day care, and anyone who is in contact with the droplets of the infected person (for example: sharing eating utensils).

People with meningococcal disease should not go to school, daycare or the work place until at least 24 hours after treatment has begun and their symptoms are gone.

How is meningococcal disease treated?

There are a few different antibiotics that are effective in treating meningococcal disease. People who have been in close, direct contact with a patient with meningococcal disease may also need to take antibiotics as a preventive measure to get rid of

the bacteria they may be carrying in their throat. These people may include household members, sexual and other close contacts, persons performing mouth to mouth resuscitation, day care centre classmates, or anyone directly exposed to the person's droplets (for example: kissing, sharing eating utensils or drink containers). Close contacts need to watch for early signs of illness, especially fever.

People who are casual contacts (for example: share a classroom, office or work setting) are not usually given preventive antibiotic treatment.

How can I reduce the risk of meningococcal disease?

There are vaccines that will protect against some types of meningococcal disease. Meningococcal vaccines are part of the routine childhood immunization schedule (12 months & Grade seven) and are also recommended for certain high risk groups. You should discuss with your healthcare provider to find out if any of them are recommended for you.

