

MENINGOCOCCAL (Invasive) DISEASE

What is Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease?

Meningococcal (Invasive) disease is an infection caused by meningococcus bacteria. It is a very rare but serious infection that can result in severe outcomes. Many people (approximately 10-20% of the population) carry the bacteria at the back of their throat or nose without any ill effects. In rare instances, meningococcal bacteria overcome the body's natural defenses and cause serious illness, including meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or a widespread infection in the body involving blood and multiple organs and even death.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms occur 2 to 10 days (usually 3 to 4 days) after exposure and may include high fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and dislike of bright lights (photophobia), confusion, drowsiness, a small purplish rash, irritability, or excessive crying in young children. Severe cases can result in coma and, if untreated, shock and death.

How is Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease spread?

The infection is spread to other persons through direct contact with droplets from the nose or throat (saliva) of an infected person. Kissing, coughing, sneezing, and sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, water bottles, cigarettes, or lipstick can spread the disease. In some cases, persons may be carrying the bacteria and not be affected by it, but they may still pass it onto other persons who could become ill. The infection is not acquired by simply being in the room as an affected person or breathing air where an affected person has been.

How is Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on clinical symptoms and laboratory testing.

Who is at risk of Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease?

Although the disease can occur at any age, the highest risk for infection is among children under five years of age, with the next highest risk among teenagers 15-19 years of age., people living in crowded living quarters, travelers to areas where the disease is more common, those with HIV infection and smokers are more at risk of invasive meningococcal disease.

How can Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease be prevented?

Take precautions. Most cases are unexpected and cannot be prevented. However, you can reduce your risk by not sharing drinks, eating utensils, lipsticks, cigarettes, etc. with anyone who is known to be infected. If you have been in direct contact with a person ill with a meningococcal infection, you should see a doctor to receive the recommended antibiotic. This will help prevent the development of the disease in you. A person with meningococcal infection should be excluded from schools, daycares, workplace or other public settings.

Practice good personal hygiene. Regular and frequent hand washing with soap and warm water.

Immunize. Vaccines are available to prevent many types of meningococcal disease. A meningococcal group C vaccine is offered free of charge to babies 12 months of age. A meningococcal vaccine that offers protection against 4 strains (groups A, C, Y, W) is offered to adolescents (Grade 9 students) and persons with certain health problems. Persons wishing to be vaccinated but who are not eligible for publicly funded vaccine should consult their health care provider.

How is Meningococcal (Invasive) Disease treated?

There are effective antibiotics for the treatment of meningococcal infection. Consult with your healthcare provider. Treatment should be started as soon as infection is suspected.

What is the Public Health response?

Health-care providers, hospitals, laboratories and some institutions are required to notify cases to Public Health. Public Health staff may investigate to find out how the infection occurred, identify other people who are at risk of infection (i.e. close contacts of individuals infected with meningococcal disease), provide advice as necessary, and implement control measures (for example preventative antibiotics and vaccination).

Further Information

Please contact your health-care provider, local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811.