

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection which can very quickly become life threatening. Anyone of any age can get meningococcal disease, but it mostly affects children and young adults. Always treat symptoms of meningococcal disease as an emergency and seek medical help immediately.

Meningococcal disease

The bacteria that cause meningococcal disease live in the nose or throat of about 1 in 10 people. Most of these people remain well, but they can spread the bacteria to others who in some cases become very ill.

Meningococcal infection is not common in Australia, but is common in some other countries. Most cases of meningococcal disease in Australia are caused by the meningococcus bacteria strains B and C.

The two most serious forms of meningococcal infection are meningitis and septicaemia.

Meningitis

Meningitis means inflammation of the meninges, the lining that covers the brain and spinal cord. It is usually caused by a bacterial or viral infection. Meningitis caused by meningococcus can lead to permanent disability (e.g. deafness, brain damage) or death within hours if not properly treated.

Septicaemia

Septicaemia means an infection of the blood (blood poisoning). It is usually caused by bacteria. Toxins released by bacteria in the blood can damage blood vessels and organs all over the body. Septicaemia caused by meningococcus can cause bleeding into the skin, which causes a distinct type of skin rash.

Meningococcus bacteria can cause so much damage so quickly that the infected person can die within a few hours of starting to feel ill. Sometimes the person needs finger, toe or limb amputations, or is left with kidney or liver damage.

How is it spread?

Meningococcus bacteria are spread in fluid from the nose and throat, by coughing, sneezing, spitting and close contact (e.g. kissing).

Signs and symptoms

The start of meningococcal disease can feel like the start of the 'flu', but the person will usually get sicker much more quickly than someone who has the 'flu'. Symptoms can occur in any order and not all symptoms may occur.

Symptoms of meningococcal disease include:

- fever
- headache
- sleepiness, confusion or coma
- stiff neck
- joint and body aches
- seizures (fits)
- eyes sensitive to light
- vomiting, nausea or diarrhoea
- fast or unusual breathing
- pale or unusual skin colour
- rash of pink, red, purple or brownish spots or bruises.

Symptoms in babies and children also include:

- being irritable, unsettled and not wanting to be handled
- a high-pitched cry
- a blank, staring expression
- neck and back arching
- being hard to wake, tired or floppy
- refusing to eat
- cold hands and feet
- pale or blotchy skin.

Who is at risk?

The risk of catching the infection is higher in some people and situations including:

- children under five years
- teenagers and young adults (15-24 years)
- close contact with a 'carrier' of the bacteria (e.g. in childcare centres or crowded living conditions)
- close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease
- during winter and early spring
- smokers or inhaling smoke from others
- recent upper respiratory tract (airways) infections (e.g. influenza)
- people with no spleen
- people with a weakened immune system.

Older people (over 45 years) have a high risk of death if they get a meningococcal infection.

Treatment

Meningococcal disease can be successfully treated with antibiotic injections if started quickly. Successful treatment and recovery depends mainly on recognising symptoms and getting to a doctor **immediately**.

Whenever meningococcal disease occurs, the doctor must notify public health authorities. People who have recently been in close contact with the patient are then contacted. These close contacts may be advised to have treatment that can help protect them and stop the spread of meningococcal disease.

Protection by immunisation

In Australia a vaccine (injection), which gives protection against meningococcus 'C strain' is offered free of charge to children at 12 months of age, as part of the National Immunisation Program. Others are not eligible for free vaccine, but can arrange vaccination with their doctor.

At present there is no vaccine against meningococcus 'B strain' available in Australia.

Self care

- Have your child vaccinated against meningococcal C disease. Adults can also benefit from this protection. Ask a doctor or pharmacist.
- Watch for symptoms of meningococcal disease and get to a doctor or hospital **quickly** if you are worried or unsure.
- If you have been in close contact with

Important

- Someone with meningococcal disease can die within a few hours of the first symptoms.
- No vaccine provides complete protection against all strains of this disease.
- Watch for symptoms of this disease, especially a rash of red-purple spots or bruises – but do not wait for a rash – it may be the last symptom to appear or not appear at all.
- If a person has symptoms of this disease, get them to a doctor or hospital **IMMEDIATELY** – every second counts.
- If the person is sent home, return them to the doctor or hospital straight away if symptoms worsen or you are still worried.
- In an emergency phone 000 for an ambulance. (You may need to dial 112 on a mobile phone outside its network coverage area).

a person who has the disease, ask a doctor about antibiotic protection.

- Always cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Never put anything in your or your child's mouth that may have been in someone else's mouth and has not been washed (e.g. eating utensils, musical instruments, pens, lipstick, baby's dummy).
- Wash hands well and often, especially after nappy changing and toileting, and before eating or preparing food.
- Don't smoke.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

For more information

Immunise Australia Program

Phone: 1800 671 811

Website: www.immunise.health.gov.au

The Meningitis Centre

Phone: (08) 9489 7791

Freecall: 1800 250 223

Website: www.meningitis.com.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

NPS Medicine Wise

Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

Related fact cards

» *Childhood Immunisation*

» *Smoking*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: