
Bacterial Meningitis

What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissue and fluid surrounding a person's spinal cord and brain. It can be caused by infection, among other things. One infectious cause is a bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. Presence of this organism is found in some people and does not always cause symptoms or disease. In the US, illness is sporadic, usually with isolated cases or localized outbreaks. There are thirteen different groups of *N. meningitidis*, but Types A, B, and C cause more than 90% of disease globally.

What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

Symptoms include a sudden onset of fever, severe headache, sensitivity to light and a stiff neck. Some people also have nausea and vomiting or a red rash.

How does bacterial meningitis spread?

Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious through direct person-to-person contact. For these forms, household contacts may be at highest risk of picking up the organism. Coughing, sneezing and kissing can spread the disease through oral secretions, as can sharing food, cups or eating utensils. It is not spread through casual contact or breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

How is bacterial meningitis diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. Meningitis diagnosis usually requires examination of the spinal fluid for cells and culture for bacteria. Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for selection of the correct antibiotics.

How serious is bacterial meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis is serious. As the disease progresses, symptoms can advance to include sleepiness, confusion and seizures. Bacterial meningitis can cause death or serious lasting effects such as brain damage or hearing loss.

Is there any treatment for bacterial meningitis?

Yes. Treatment includes early antibiotic therapy and usually requires hospitalization. Care should be taken to prevent the spread of disease to others until 24 hours of antibiotics are completed.

What can I do to prevent getting bacterial meningitis?

Fortunately, two highly safe and effective vaccines are available to prevent many cases of this particular type of bacterial meningitis: the Meningococcal Conjugate vaccine (MCV), preferred for people 2-55 years of age, and the Meningococcal Polysaccharide vaccine (MPV), given to those over 55 and when MCV is unavailable. New recommendations include two MCV vaccines for teenagers (around age 11 and 16) as well as those with weak immune systems. Additionally, avoiding direct, intimate contact with those experiencing symptoms and frequent hand washing can help prevent the spread of disease.

For more information about bacterial meningitis refer to the DHHS website at www.dhhs.nh.gov or call the Communicable Disease Control Program (603) 271-4496.