Meningococcal Disease
(Bacterial Meningitis)

FACT SHEET

Bacterial meningitis is usually severe. While most people with meningitis recover, it can cause serious complications, such as brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disabilities.

Transmission

The germs that cause bacterial meningitis can be contagious. Some bacteria can spread through the exchange (e.g., by kissing) of respiratory and throat secretions (e.g., saliva or mucus). Fortunately, most of the bacteria that cause meningitis are not as contagious as viruses that cause the common cold or the flu. Also, the bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Sometimes the bacteria that cause meningitis spread to other people. This usually happens when there is close or long contact with a sick person in the same household or daycare center, or if they had direct contact with a patient's oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend). People who qualify as close contacts of a person with meningococcal or Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) meningitis are at higher risk of getting disease and may need preventive antibiotics (see Prevention). Tell your doctor if you think you have been exposed to someone with meningitis.

Healthy people can carry the bacteria in their nose or throat without getting sick. Rarely, these bacteria can invade the body and cause disease. Most people who 'carry' the bacteria never become sick.

Signs and Symptoms

Meningitis infection may show up in a person by a sudden onset of fever, headache, and stiff neck. It will often have other symptoms, such as

- Nausea,
- Vomiting,
- Increased sensitivity to light (photophobia), and
- Altered mental status (confusion).

The symptoms of bacterial meningitis can appear quickly or over several days. Typically they develop within 3-7 days after exposure.
Later symptoms of bacterial meningitis can be very severe (e.g., seizures, coma). For this reason, **anyone who thinks they may have meningitis should see a doctor as soon as possible.**

**Diagnosis**

If meningitis is suspected, samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid (near the spinal cord) are collected and sent to the laboratory for testing. It is important to know the specific cause of meningitis because that helps doctors understand how to treat the disease, and possibly how bad it will get. In the case of bacterial meningitis, antibiotics can help prevent severe illness and reduce the spread of infection from person to person (depending on which bacteria are causing the infection).

If bacteria are present, they can often be grown (cultured). Growing the bacteria in the laboratory is important for confirming the presence of bacteria, identifying the specific type of bacteria that is causing the infection, and deciding which antibiotic will work best. Other tests can sometimes find and identify the bacteria if the cultures do not.

**Treatment**

Bacterial meningitis can be treated effectively with antibiotics. **It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible.** Appropriate antibiotic treatment of the most common types of bacterial meningitis should reduce the risk of dying from meningitis to below 15%, although the risk remains higher among young infants and the elderly.

**Prevention**

The most effective way to protect you and your child against certain types of bacterial meningitis is to **complete the recommended vaccine schedule.**

Antibiotics may be recommended for close contacts of people with meningococcal meningitis. Antibiotics may also be recommended for the entire family if a family member develops severe Hib infection and there’s a high-risk person in the house. This is to decrease the risk of spreading disease to that person, since they are at increased risk for severe disease. Your doctor or local health department will tell you if there’s a high-risk person in your house and whether antibiotics are needed.