

Meningococcal Disease

Information Sheet

What is it?

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis* (*N. meningitidis*), known as meningococci. There are several different groups of meningococcal bacteria including Groups A, B, C, W and Y. These groups of bacteria can be divided into specific strains. One of the B strains is the most common in New Zealand. *N. meningitidis* causes severe illnesses including meningitis (an infection of membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord) and septicaemia (blood poisoning).

N. meningitidis is a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956. People suffering from the illness will be contacted by their local Communicable Disease Nurse or Health Protection Officer to try and establish the source of their illness, possible contacts and immunisation history.

How does a person become infected?

N. meningitidis is a bacteria that can live harmlessly in the nose and throats of 10-25% of people without causing disease.

The bacteria is spread through contact with respiratory secretions by coughing, sneezing and kissing. A person who is carrying *N. meningitidis* can infect other people at any time while meningococci are still present in the discharges from their nose and mouth. Antibiotic treatment can be used to eradicate *N. meningitidis* from a carrier's nose and mouth.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Meningococcal disease can look like influenza in its early stages but it can quickly get much worse. The illness may develop slowly over 1-2 days or quickly over a period of a few hours.

Your baby or child may:

- have a fever
- high pitched cry or unsettled
- refuse drinks or feeds
- vomit
- be sleepy or floppy/harder to wake
- have a stiff neck
- dislike bright lights
- have a rash or spots (that don't fade when pressed and look like small bruises)

Adults may:

- a fever
- a headache
- vomit
- be sleepy, confused, delirious or unconscious
- a stiff neck
- dislike bright lights
- have joint pain and aching muscles
- have a rash or spots (that don't fade when pressed and look like small bruises)

A rash can appear anywhere on the body. It is important to mention even one spot on a sick child or adult when talking to your doctor.

Early recognition and antibiotic treatment can be life saving. If you or someone in your household is unwell with one or more of the above symptoms you should seek medical advice immediately and tell them what the symptoms are. If your doctor is not available you should take them to the nearest hospital Emergency Department.

How bad is it?

Meningococcal disease is serious and can sometimes cause death or permanent disability such as deafness or disfigurement. This disease can affect anyone but it is particularly serious if contracted by infants, children or young adults.

How do I avoid the illness?

The best way to avoid getting sick with meningococcal disease is to not share spit/saliva and other respiratory secretions with other people. To do this;

- cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- thoroughly wash your hands (with soap and warm water) and dry with paper towels on a regular basis

Vaccines are available and may be recommended for travel to countries with higher risk of meningococcal disease.

It is important to seek medical help in the early stages of noticing one or more of the symptoms listed on this fact sheet.

What do I do if I have been in contact with some one who has meningococcal disease?

For adults and children who have been in close contact with some one who has meningococcal disease it is recommended that they receive a course of antibiotic treatment as soon as possible (preferably within 24 hours of the diagnosis being made). The Public Health Unit will arrange this.

Public Health will decide who is a close contact. This may include the following;

- people who live in the same household as the unwell person
- people who have been exposed to the case's spit/saliva, such as through kissing, or performing CPR emergency care in the seven days prior to onset of illness in the unwell person
- people who have frequently eaten or slept in the same house in the seven days prior to the onset of illness in the unwell person

The antibiotic cannot prevent meningococcal infection developing in a contact. It is given to get rid of the bug in people who might be carrying the bug in their nose or throat. This can prevent further spread of infection amongst close contacts. All contacts given antibiotics must still seek urgent medical attention if they develop any of the symptoms listed above in the 7-10 days following treatment.

For further information please contact:



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