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What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis* (also known as "meningococcus"). A small proportion of infected people can develop a serious form of illness, such as meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or a bloodstream infection (septicemia).

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is more common in infants, teens, young adults, and adults 65 years and older. Other persons at increased risk include household contacts of a person known to have had this disease, people with weakened immune systems (e.g., those with HIV or those without a spleen), people in community settings (e.g., college campuses), and people traveling to certain parts of the world where meningococcal meningitis is more common.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Neisseria meningitidis bacteria are spread from person to person through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions. An infected person can spread the bacteria by coughing or sneezing directly into the face of others, kissing a person on the mouth, or sharing cups, water bottles, eating utensils, cigarettes, vapes, lipstick, or toothbrushes. The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with the disease has been.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The symptoms depend on where the infection is located. Meningococcal meningitis is characterized by a sudden onset of fever, headache, stiff neck, sensitivity to light, confusion, nausea, and vomiting. In newborns and infants, these symptoms might be absent or difficult to notice. The infant might appear to be slow or inactive, irritable, vomiting or feeding poorly. A less common but more severe form of meningococcal disease is meningococcal septicemia. The symptoms of meningococcal septicemia include fatigue, nausea, cold hands and feet, fever, chills, severe pain in the muscles, joints, chest or abdomen (belly), rapid breathing, diarrhea, and a dark purple rash.

How soon after exposure do symptoms of meningococcal disease appear?

Symptoms commonly develop three to four days after a person is exposed, but onset can range from one to ten days.

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

Laboratory tests on samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid are needed to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease requires immediate treatment with antibiotics. Depending on how serious the infection is, other treatments might also be necessary, such as breathing support, medications to treat low blood pressure, surgery to remove dead tissue, and wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin.

Do people who have had contact with someone with meningococcal disease need to be tested and treated?

Contacts of people with meningococcal disease should be tested if they develop symptoms. Preventative antibiotics may be prescribed to reduce the risk of infection.

How can meningococcal disease be prevented?

Vaccines are available for the bacteria that cause meningococcal disease. Keeping up to date with recommended vaccinations is the best defense against the disease. Talk to a healthcare provider if you have questions about meningococcal vaccines. Preventive treatment with antibiotics for household members, roommates, or anyone with direct contact to the saliva or spit from someone sick with meningococcal disease can reduce the risk of infection. Good hygiene can reduce the risk of infection as well, such as hand washing, covering noses and mouths when sneezing or coughing, and not sharing cigarettes, vapes, lipstick, straws, cups, drinking glasses, toothbrushes, or eating utensils.

How can I get more information about meningococcal disease?

- If you have concerns about meningococcal disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- Contact your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the VDH Meningococcal Disease page at vdh.virginia.gov/surveillance-and-investigation/meningococcal-disease/ or the CDC Meningococcal page at cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html for more information.

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