

Meningococcal Fact Sheet

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease refers to infections that are caused by bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as meningococcus. About 1 out of 10 people have this type of bacteria in the back of their nose and throat with no signs or symptoms of disease; this is called being 'a carrier'.

Sometimes *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria can invade the body causing illnesses which are known as invasive meningococcal disease. These illnesses are often severe and include infections of the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and bloodstream infections (meningococemia).

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease can spread from person to person. The bacteria are spread when the nose and throat secretions from someone who is carrying the bacteria gets into another person's mouth or nose. This can occur from coughing, kissing and sharing objects that have been in an infected person's mouth, as well as from other close contact like living in the same household or attending the same child care centre as an infected person.

Fortunately, the bacteria are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or the flu. It is not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningococcal disease has been.

Who is most at risk for meningococcal disease?

In Canada, less than 1 person in every 100,000 develops meningococcal disease. Invasive meningococcal disease occurs most commonly in children under 5 years of age, adolescents and young adults; however, anyone can develop the infection.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The symptoms of meningococcal disease come on suddenly and can include:

- fever,
- headache,
- stiff neck
- a red, pin point rash
- nausea and/or vomiting

- increased sensitivity to light
- confusion

Babies may appear to be slow, inactive, and/or irritable; they may vomit or feed poorly.

If you think you or your child has symptoms that could be meningococcal disease, seek medical care right away. Meningococcal disease is very serious. Among people who get ill, between 8% and 15% die and among those who survive, 10% to 20% can develop complications. Complications can include hearing loss, skin scarring and intellectual disability.

How soon do the meningococcal disease symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear any time between 2 to 10 days after exposure, but usually appear within 3 to 4 days. The symptoms worsen rapidly, sometimes in a matter of hours. In some cases, death may occur within hours of the onset of symptoms.

How is meningococcal disease treated?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics, but quick medical attention is extremely important.

What are the recommendations for people who have been in contact with a person with meningococcal disease?

To prevent them from getting sick, people who have been in close contact with someone who is sick with meningococcal disease are usually advised to take antibiotics and may also be offered a vaccination. Close contacts include people who live in the same household, had sexual contact or exchanged saliva with the sick person, as well as those in the same child care centre. All contacts should be alerted to watch for early signs of illness, including fever, and seek treatment promptly.

Casual contact that might occur in a school classroom, office or work setting is not usually significant enough to warrant antibiotics. It is still important for casual contacts to monitor for any symptoms and seek medical care should they develop symptoms that could be meningococcal disease.

How is meningococcal disease treated?

Keeping up to date with recommended immunizations is the best defense against meningococcal disease. Maintaining healthy habits, like getting plenty of rest and not coming into close contact with people who are sick, can also help.

In Ontario, there are a number of vaccines which protect against some of the various serogroups (strains) that cause meningococcal disease. Since 2004, routine immunization against meningococcal (serogroup C) disease has been publicly funded for children one year of age. Since 2009, students in Grade 7 have been offered a vaccine that protects against four meningococcal serogroups (A, C, Y, W). Starting in the 2014/15 school year, grade 7 students need to have proof of immunization with meningococcal vaccine, or a valid exemption, to attend school in Ontario.

For additional information about meningococcal disease or the meningococcal vaccine, contact your local public health unit. You can find the contact information for your local public health unit through

the ministry's [Public Health Unit Locator Tool](#). More information on Ontario's meningococcal immunization program is available at Ontario.ca/vaccines. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics, but quick medical attention is extremely important.