



## FACT SHEET

# Bacterial Meningitis: Meningococcal Disease

### What meningococcal disease is

Meningococcal disease is illness caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as “meningococcal bacteria.” There are 13 different groups, or “serogroups,” of *N. meningitidis*. Ninety of 100 cases of meningococcal disease are caused by groups A, B and C though the proportion of cases caused by W, X and Y is increasing.

### What meningococcal disease is not

Many people confuse meningitis and meningococcal disease. However, the terms are distinct. Meningitis is an infection of the fluids that line the brain and spinal cord. Other causes of meningitis include viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, amoebas and injuries.

### Risks

- Meningococcal disease kills roughly 10 of every 100 people infected — even when treated.
- Of those who survive, roughly 10 to 20 of 100 people will suffer disabilities such as hearing or limb loss, brain or kidney damage, nervous system problems, or severe scars from skin grafts.

### Who is at risk?

Although anyone can get meningococcal disease, certain people are at higher risk, including:

- Babies younger than 1 year old
- Adolescents and young adults ages 16 to 23
- Microbiologists who routinely work with meningococcal bacteria
- People with certain medical conditions or who take certain drugs that affect the immune system
- People at risk because of a local outbreak in their community

### How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease spreads when an uninfected person comes into contact with an infected person’s nose or throat fluids (droplets from a sneeze, saliva). This happens through close contact, such as:

- Living in the same household
- Kissing
- Coughs and sneezes that are not covered
- Sharing silverware or plates
- Sharing drinking containers (e.g., cups, beer or soda cans)
- Sharing smoking devices (e.g., cigarettes, joints, e-cigarettes)

Meningococcal disease can spread until the bacteria are no longer in the nose or mouth; it can also spread up to 24 hours after antibiotics are started. It is not as easily spread as the common cold or flu, but you should still take measures to protect yourself.

## Prevention

- Always practice good hand hygiene. Use soap and water or 70 percent alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Do not share utensils, drinking containers, smoking devices, toothbrushes or cosmetics.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Take preventive medication, or “prophylaxis,” after possible exposure if a health care provider advises it.
- Get vaccinated.

**Note:** Routine vaccinations are available and typically provide protection against groups A, C, W and Y. **Routine meningitis vaccines do not cover MenB.**

Group B, or MenB, vaccine may be recommended during an outbreak of this type of meningococcal disease. **Do not** assume that a previous meningitis vaccine will work if health officials recommend a MenB vaccine when there are cases or an outbreak near you. Ask a health care provider if you have questions about your vaccine history or health officials’ recommendations.

## Signs and symptoms of illness

Meningococcal disease can progress quickly. Noticing the illness early can prevent serious disability and even death. Early signs of illness are similar to those of other common illnesses and may be hard to recognize. It can take two to 10 days to feel ill after exposure to meningococcal bacteria.

**Meningitis** is the most common way meningococcal disease affects the body. Signs include:

- Fever
- Stiff neck
- Vomiting
- Confusion
- Headache
- Nausea
- Sensitivity to light

**Meningococcemia**, known as “bacteremia” or “sepsis,” is a severe way meningococcal disease affects the body. It is a blood infection caused by meningococcal bacteria. This causes clotting of blood vessels, extremely low blood pressure and organ failure. Signs include:

- Fever
- Rash
- Severe aches and pains in muscles, joints, chest or belly
- Shaking chills
- Fatigue
- Rapid breathing

## When to seek care

People who notice these signs of illness should contact a health care provider. Key signs include fever, along with severe headache, stiff neck or rash. Seek emergency care if they are unusually sudden or severe.

## Treatment

Antibiotics are the usual course of treatment for bacterial meningococcal disease. The disease can progress rapidly if the person does not promptly receive antibiotics.



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