



COUNTY OF ORANGE HEALTH CARE AGENCY

EPIDEMIOLOGY & ASSESSMENT PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES



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Meningococcal Infection Information Sheet

What is meningococcal infection?

Meningococcal infection is a bacterial infection that can result in severe illness or even death. The two most common types of meningococcal infection are: 1) meningococcal meningitis, when the bacteria infect the fluid and the covering of a person's spinal cord and brain, and 2) meningococemia, or infection of the bloodstream.

Is it easy to get meningococcal infection?

No, it is not. The bacteria are passed only by direct and close contact with someone who is infected or is carrying the bacteria. Many people (as many as 1 in 10) carry the bacteria in the back of the nose and throat at any given time, especially in winter. While most of these people are healthy and do not develop disease, they may pass the bacteria on to others. Only a very small number of those who have the bacteria growing in the nose and throat develop disease, while others remain healthy. The reasons for this are not known.

The bacteria are spread from person to person through direct, prolonged contact with the infected person's nose and throat secretions, such as through coughing or sneezing. Living in the same household, kissing, or sharing food, beverages, or other things that may go in the mouth are indicators of contact close enough to have spread the bacteria. The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near a person who has the disease or is carrying the bacteria. The time from exposure to the start of illness ranges from 1 to 10 days; typically it is 3-4 days.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of meningococcal infection vary depending on the form the infection takes. Common symptoms include sudden onset of high fever, an intense headache, nausea and often vomiting. Sometimes present are a rash (small pin-point dots, pink spots, or tiny blisters or bruises). A stiff neck may occur in those who develop meningitis.

What do I need to do if I had close contact with someone with meningococcal disease?

Although the risk of illness in people who have been exposed to the person with meningococcal infection is low, an antibiotic to prevent possible illness is recommended for the people who have had close contact (see above) with someone with meningococcal disease. The preventive antibiotic treatment should be started as soon as possible after exposure. Also, be aware of the symptoms of this illness so that you can be diagnosed and treated early if you become ill. There is no recommended screening test for meningococcal infection if you are not ill. Preventive treatment is **NOT** recommended for people who did not themselves have contact with someone with diagnosed meningococcal infection.

Is there a vaccine to prevent this disease?

There are two vaccines available which can protect against some of the strains of this bacteria. Vaccination is recommended for adolescents, college freshmen living in dormitories, and other persons at above-average risk for the disease. Please discuss with your health care provider if you are interested in the vaccine.

If you have any questions about meningococcal infection, please contact your health care provider or Orange County Epidemiology at 714-834-8180.