

# Meningococcal Disease Fact Sheet

***Neisseria meningitidis* (the meningococcus) is a bacterium that can cause serious infections.**

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection that can cause meningitis (inflammation of the brain and spinal cord covering), sepsis (blood infection), pneumonia (lung infection), or joint infections. Meningococcal disease can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, loss of limbs, or even death. Meningococcal disease is one of the important causes of bacterial meningitis in the United States.

**Meningococcal disease is spread from person-to-person through close contact with infected respiratory secretions.**

Meningococci are spread by direct, close contact with saliva, mucous, or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. The bacteria are not spread by breathing the air where someone with the disease has been. Many people carry the bacteria in their noses and throats, but they do not become ill – they are called “carriers.” These carriers can spread the bacteria to other people.

**Symptoms to look for include:**

- High fever
- Nausea and vomiting
- Severe headache
- Neck stiffness
- Skin rash of small, bright, red spots or a larger, reddish/purple “bruise”

Symptoms occur within 2 to 10 days (usually 3 to 4 days) after a person has been exposed; symptoms often begin suddenly.

**Laboratory testing is needed to confirm a meningococcal infection.**

People who think they have a meningococcal infection should see a doctor **immediately** for evaluation. The diagnosis is usually made by testing the blood or spinal fluid.

**See a doctor immediately for treatment.**

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Meningococcal disease can be treated with an antibiotic and supportive care.

**A person in close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease** should seek medical advice as well. Preventive treatment with certain antibiotics is often recommended and should not be delayed. Your doctor or health department will decide which antibiotic is best in your situation. Close contacts might include:

- Persons who live in the same house;
- Persons who have contact with mouth or nose secretions, such as through kissing and sharing eating utensils, toothbrushes, or cigarettes;
- Some child care or nursery school contacts;
- Persons who have been involved in medical procedures, such as intubation or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

**A vaccine is available to prevent the most types of meningococcal disease.**

A single dose of meningococcal vaccine is recommended for all children ages 11 to 18 years. The vaccine is also recommended for certain high risk groups such as military recruits, travelers to high risk areas (such as the “meningitis belt” of sub-Saharan Africa), persons without a spleen, certain laboratory workers, and some others. In Maryland, vaccination of all college students who live on-campus in a dormitory is required. For additional information about meningococcal vaccine, please visit:

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/Pubs/vis/default.htm>.