

Bacterial Meningitis Q & A

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a term that describes inflammation of the tissues and fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by bacteria or viruses.

Meningococcal meningitis is a type of bacterial meningitis caused by a type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. This same bacteria can also cause a serious blood infection.

Viral meningitis, which is caused by viruses, can cause similar symptoms to bacterial meningitis, however it is seldom life-threatening. Most people make a full recovery without any specific treatment.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal meningitis?

Symptoms include fever, intense headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and frequently rash. Any of these symptoms can develop 1-10 days after being exposed to an infected person. If you experience two or more of these symptoms, seek help from a health care provider right away.

How do people get meningococcal meningitis?

The bacteria that causes bacterial meningitis is very common. Most people will carry this bacteria in the back of their nose and throat at some point in their lives without ever getting sick or even realizing they are there. In a few people, the bacteria overcome the body's immune system and pass through the lining of the nose and throat into the blood stream where they can cause meningitis. It is not fully understood why a few people develop meningitis from bacteria which are harmless to most people, but it may be because of a weakened immune system.

How is meningitis spread?

Meningitis is spread through exchange of respiratory droplets or saliva with an infected person, including kissing, coughing, sneezing, and sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils, or cigarettes. Only a small percentage of people who are exposed to the bacteria will develop meningitis because most people have a natural resistance to it. However, people who have had close contact with an infected person are given antibiotics to make sure they are protected.

Fortunately, the bacteria that cause meningitis are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. The bacteria are very weak and can only survive for a short time outside the body—so they cannot live long in the air and are not carried on clothes, furniture, or other surfaces. People who have had casual contact are not at risk.

How serious is meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis can be extremely serious. It may result in blindness, hearing loss, mental retardation, loss of limbs or death. This illness is treatable with antibiotics, so it is important to seek medical attention quickly.

How long would it take to get sick if someone were infected with meningitis?

If you were going to get sick, it would occur in 1-10 days, usually less than four days. A person can be contagious from the time they are infected until the bacteria has disappeared from their body.

How common is meningococcal disease?

In the United States, meningococcal disease (which includes meningococcal meningitis) occurs annually in about 1 to 3 people per 100,000 population. Tennessee has averaged about 70 cases per year for the past few years.

Cases of meningitis are reported to the Health Department, who make sure that the patient's close contacts get antibiotics and look for links with other cases.

Is there a vaccine for meningitis?

There is a vaccine that will decrease the risk of some types of meningococcal meningitis, but it does not totally eliminate risk of the disease. It is not effective against the B strain; although it is highly effective against the C and Y strains, it still does not confer 100% protection. Protection lasts from three to five years.

For more information

The health department is available to answer questions and provide information on meningitis. For more information, please call 209-8190, Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-4p.m., or 209-8010 after hours.