

Meningitis

What is meningitis? Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people.

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis? High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. In newborns and small infants, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect, and the infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures. .

Can meningitis be treated? Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important, however, that treatment be started early in the course of the disease. Appropriate antibiotic treatment of most common types of bacterial meningitis can reduce the risk of severe complications.

Is meningitis contagious? Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. People can get the organism and can carry it in their nose and throat without developing symptoms; only a small proportion go on to develop disease. The bacteria are spread through the respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). A person may transmit the organism from the time that the person is first infected until the bacteria are no longer present in the nose and throat. Symptoms of disease may appear two to ten days after exposure, but usually within five days. Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, **and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.** People who qualify as close contacts of a person with bacterial meningitis should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease.

How can I prevent meningitis? Risk of transmission of meningococcal infection can be reduced by good hygiene. Persons should cover their noses and mouths when sneezing or coughing and discard used tissues promptly. Wash hands thoroughly, or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, before and after eating and after coughing or sneezing. Do not share cigarettes, straws, cups, glasses, or eating utensils. Eating and drinking utensils can be used by others only after they have been washed. Yes, there are vaccines against some strains of bacteria. Children between the ages of 11-12 or those under 18 not vaccinated, and college freshman, especially those who live in dormitories should be educated about the availability of a safe and effective vaccine which can decrease their risk. Meningitis cases should be reported to state or local health departments to assure follow-up of close contacts and recognize outbreaks.

You may contact your doctor or local health department if you would like more information. Additional information is also available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov).