



**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
DIVISION OF DISEASE CONTROL**

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

What is meningococcal meningitis?

Meningococcal meningitis is caused by a germ called *Neisseria meningitidis*. This germ can cause infection of the blood or fluid around the brain (meningitis). When a person has meningitis, he/she can have high fevers, a stiff neck, bad headaches, and vomiting. **If you or your child develops any of these complaints, you should call or see your family doctor immediately.** This infection can be treated successfully with antibiotics, but they need to be started right away.

How does the meningitis germ spread?

The germ that causes meningococcal meningitis can live in the noses and throats of healthy people. Most people who carry this germ are healthy and have no signs of illness; only a few become very ill. It may be passed to people who have very close contact with the sick person. It is not spread by casual contact, or by breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Who can get meningococcal meningitis?

Anyone can get meningococcal meningitis, although it is most common in infants and children. People who have very close contact with the sick person sometimes get this disease. Examples of very close contact include living in the same household, infants or toddlers attending the same daycare center, through intimate contact like kissing. In the rare case when a close contact gets sick, this will happen 1 to 10 days after being exposed to the germ; most cases occur within 4 days after exposure.

People who are in the same classroom, sit at the same lunch table, or ride the same bus as the sick person do not have to worry about catching the germ.

How is meningococcal meningitis diagnosed?

Meningococcal meningitis is diagnosed by isolating the bacteria from either the blood or the spinal fluid (fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord), which is removed during a procedure called a lumbar puncture or spinal tap.

Should people who have been in contact with a diagnosed case of meningitis receive preventive treatment?

People who have been in close contact with a person diagnosed with meningococcal meningitis may be considered for treatment with a special antibiotic. These people include household members, intimate contacts, day care center playmates, healthcare professionals who have performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In general, the casual contact that occurs in school classrooms, offices or workplaces is usually not significant enough exposure to require preventive treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal meningitis?

There is a vaccine that will protect against some, not all of the common strains of meningitis. It is only recommended for college freshmen living in dormitories, for travelers to parts of the world where meningitis is extremely common, and for outbreak situations where the outbreak strain of bacteria is covered by the vaccine. In general, the best way to prevent most infections, including this one, is through careful hand washing, especially during flu season, after using the bathroom or changing diapers, and before preparing or serving food.

What does the Health Department do when a case of meningitis occurs?

When notified of a case of meningitis, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health immediately works to identify the possible contacts who should receive preventive treatment, and ensure that it is received either through a private doctor or the health department. The department works with school nurses, daycare center directors, families, and anyone else who had contact with the individual and can provide information about the close contacts who should receive medication. It also works to determine if there are any possible related cases of meningitis to determine if the case has occurred in isolation, or may be part of an outbreak. In Philadelphia, approximately 15-20 cases of this disease occur every year, and nearly all of them occur sporadically, without any identifiable connection to another case.

If you have questions about meningococcal meningitis or other infectious diseases, call the Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6741.