



Weill Cornell Medical College

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Patient Education:

Meningococcal Meningitis

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Meningococcal Meningitis

Meningococcal meningitis is inflammation of the membranes (*meninges*) around the brain and spinal cord. It is caused by a bacterial infection. This type of meningitis is caused by a type of bacteria that can also infect your bloodstream. The bacteria can spread from person to person through close contact (*contagious*).

Meningococcal meningitis is a medical emergency. It can be life threatening if not treated quickly with antibiotic medicines. Complications can include hearing loss and brain damage.

Most cases of meningococcal meningitis can be prevented with a vaccination.

CAUSES

Meningococcal meningitis is caused by meningococcus bacteria. Some people normally have meningococcus bacteria in their nose or throat. It is not known why some people who carry the bacteria get the disease and others do not.

Meningococcal meningitis can spread from person to person through coughing, sneezing, kissing, or sharing a drinking glass. This illness is not as contagious as the flu or a cold. It usually spreads only to people who are in close contact for long periods of time, such as family members or roommates.

RISK FACTORS

People who have a greater risk of meningococcal meningitis include:

- Children and young adults.
- Students living in dormitories.
- People who live in military housing.
- People who have a medical condition that lowers their resistance to infection.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Signs and symptoms of meningococcal meningitis may start suddenly. They can include:

- High fever.
- Stiff neck.
- Sensitivity to light.
- Headache.
- Confusion.
- Vomiting.

If meningococcal infection spreads to your blood (*meningococcal septicemia*), you may have these signs and symptoms:

- Chills.
- Fatigue.
- Muscle aches.

- Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.
- Rapid breathing.
- Red spots or purple blotches on the skin. These may look like tiny pinpoints.

DIAGNOSIS

Your health care provider may suspect meningococcal meningitis based on your symptoms. The health care provider will also do a physical exam. This may include tests to confirm the diagnosis, such as:

- Blood tests.
- A procedure that involves using a needle to take a sample of the fluid around your spinal cord (*spinal tap*).

The samples of blood and spinal fluid are sent to a lab for testing to see if meningococcal bacteria will grow from them (*cultures*). If bacteria grow from the samples, that confirms the diagnosis.

TREATMENT

Meningococcal meningitis requires treatment in a hospital with antibiotic medicines. You will begin taking these medicines right away, even before your test results are back. The antibiotic medicines may be given through an IV tube that is inserted in a vein in your hand or arm. This is the fastest way to get the medicine into your body. Most people receive IV antibiotics for about 1 week.

Depending on your test results, you may also need to have other types of medicines during your treatment. For example, you may be given steroids to reduce swelling and prevent complications such as hearing loss and seizures.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Take medicines only as directed by your health care provider.
- Take your antibiotic medicine as directed by your health care provider. Finish the antibiotic even if you start to feel better.
- Tell all of your close contacts that you have meningococcal meningitis. They may need to see a health care provider for treatment. Even people who do not get sick may need to take an antibiotic that will lower their chance of getting infected.
- To prevent the infection from spreading:
 - Wash your hands often.
 - Stay away from other people as much as possible until you are better.
- Go back to your usual activities slowly.
- Keep all follow-up visits as directed by your health care provider. This is important.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

You have a fever with a headache or stiff neck.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have a high fever with severe headache, stiff neck, confusion, or vomiting.

- You suddenly lose hearing or vision.
- You have a seizure.
- You have trouble breathing.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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