

Meningococcal disease

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis*. It causes two very serious illnesses:

- meningitis (inflammation of the brain membranes), and
- septicaemia (blood poisoning).

Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics – but early treatment is very important.

Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

Meningococcal disease can look like influenza (the flu) in its early stages, but it quickly gets much worse. The symptoms and signs may not all show up at once, and the illness may develop gradually over one or two days, or much more quickly over a few hours. People with meningococcal disease may have some or all of the following:

Babies and Children:

- Fever
- Crying, unsettled, irritable
- Refusing drinks or feeds
- Vomiting
- Sleepy, floppy, harder to wake
- Stiff neck, dislike of bright lights
- Reluctant to walk
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

Adults:

- Fever
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Sleepy, confused, delirious, unconscious
- Joint pains, aching muscles
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

Meningococcal disease is life threatening – don't wait – take action!

If you or someone in your household is sick with one or more of the symptoms listed above:

- Ring a doctor or Healthline (0800 611 116) straight away – whatever the time, day or night.
- Say what the symptoms are.
- **Insist on immediate action** – don't be put off – a life may be at risk.
- Even if a person with these symptoms has been checked by a doctor, watch them carefully.
- Do not leave them alone – they may get worse suddenly and need help urgently.
- If they get worse, go straight back to a doctor or ring Healthline again.

How do you catch meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is spread in a similar way to the common cold. The bacteria live in the back of the nose and throat of about one in ten healthy people, but only very rarely cause illness. The bacteria are spread by coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing. Very close or prolonged contact (for example, living in the same house) is usually required for the bacteria to spread to other people. The risk of spread through sharing of food, drink bottles, cigarettes, or by brief kissing on the lips or cheeks is low.

Who is at risk of meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease can affect anyone of any age, but babies and children under five, teenagers and young adults are at highest risk. Children living in overcrowded households may be more at risk. Smoking and exposure to other people's tobacco smoke are also risk factors.

To help stop the spread of meningococcal bacteria:

- Cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze and cough.
- Wash and dry your hands.
- Keep your home smokefree inside, and quit smoking.

Antibiotics for close contacts:

Antibiotics are recommended for adults and children who have been in close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease, to reduce the spread of the disease. The local Public Health service follows up contacts of meningococcal disease cases and provides these antibiotics to contacts free of charge, as soon as possible and preferably within 24 hours of notification of the case.

People who have had sufficiently close contact to have an increased risk of meningococcal disease are those who, in the 7 days before the person with meningococcal disease became sick:

- Lived in the same house as the person with meningococcal disease
- Slept in the same room as the person with meningococcal disease for at least 1 night
- Intimately kissed the person with meningococcal disease
- Sat in a seat immediately to the side of the person with meningococcal disease on a bus, plane or train for 8 hours or longer
- Performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the person with meningococcal disease.

If you have had lower-level contact with the sick person, such as at work or at school, you are not a close contact and you do not need to take an antibiotic. However it is sensible to be aware of the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease and what to do if these occur.

If you are in the greater Auckland region, and you believe you have had close contact with someone who has had recent meningococcal disease but you have not been offered antibiotics, you should call Auckland Regional Public Health Service on **09 623 4600**.

Immunisation to prevent meningococcal disease

There are several different groups and strains of meningococcal disease. There is no vaccine that protects against all groups and strains. Meningococcal vaccines don't provide long-term protection, but are recommended for certain high risk groups of people (look under 'Prevention' on the Ministry of Health web pages at the link below). However the main use of meningococcal vaccines is to control outbreaks and epidemics.

To control a prolonged epidemic of one particular strain of group B meningococcal disease in New Zealand, MeNZB™ vaccine was offered to babies, children and young people under 20 years of age from 2004-2008, and to infants under 1 year old until 2011. MeNZB™ is no longer available.

Even if you or your child have been immunised with the MeNZB™ vaccine or one of the other meningococcal vaccines, you or your child can still get meningococcal disease from other strains of bacteria, so you need to know about the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease.

For further information contact the Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600

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