

Invasive Meningococcal Disease

Frequently Asked Questions

What is invasive meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal (muh-nin-jo-cok-ul) disease is a serious illness caused by a type of bacteria (germs) called *Neisseria meningitidis*. The disease may result in inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningococcal meningitis) and/or a serious blood infection (meningococcal septicemia). Meningococcal disease can become deadly in 48 hours or less. Even with treatment, 10-15% of people die. Others have long-term complications such as brain damage, learning problems, skin scarring, hearing loss, and loss of arms and/or legs.

Who gets invasive meningococcal disease?

Although it can occur in people of all ages, infants, preteens, teens, and young adults have the highest rates of invasive meningococcal disease in the United States. College students and military recruits are also slightly more at risk for the disease because of time spent in crowded living conditions like dorms or barracks. People with certain medical conditions or immune system disorders including a damaged or removed spleen are also at higher risk.

How do people get invasive meningococcal disease?

The bacteria are spread from person-to-person through the exchange of saliva (spit), coughs, and sneezes. You must be in direct (close) or lengthy contact with an infected person's secretions to be exposed. Examples of close contact include:

- Kissing
- Sharing items that come in contact with the mouth (water bottles, eating utensils, cigarettes and smoking materials, cosmetics (lip balm))
- Living in the same house
- Sleeping in the same residence (sleep overs)

About 1 out of 10 people carry meningococcal bacteria in their nose and throat, but don't get sick. These people are known as carriers. Although carriers do not have any signs or symptoms, they can still spread the bacteria and make others sick. Since so many people carry the bacteria, most cases of invasive meningococcal disease appear to be random and are not linked to other cases.

Can people with invasive meningococcal disease pass the illness to others?

The infectious period for meningococcal disease is considered to be from 7 days before the person got sick to 1 day after he or she starts on antibiotics. This means that people who were in **close** contact with the sick person during this time are at higher than average risk to get invasive meningococcal disease.

People who are identified as **close** contacts should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease, regardless of vaccination status. The bacteria are **NOT SPREAD** by casual contact activities like being in the same work or school room as the sick person. The bacteria that cause invasive meningococcal disease are less infectious than the viruses that cause the common cold or flu.

What are the symptoms of invasive meningococcal disease?

- Confusion
- Fatigue (feeling very tired)
- Fever and chills
- In later stages, a dark purple rash

- Nausea and vomiting
- Rapid breathing
- Sensitivity to light
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck

How is invasive meningococcal disease diagnosed?

A health care provider diagnoses invasive meningococcal disease by obtaining the history of symptoms, performing a physical examination, and examining blood and spinal fluid.

What is the treatment for invasive meningococcal disease?

It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible. Most people with meningococcal disease are hospitalized and treated with antibiotics. It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider. Depending on the severity of the infection, other treatments may also be necessary. These can include such things as breathing support, medications to treat low blood pressure, and wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin.

How can invasive meningococcal disease be prevented?

The best way to prevent meningococcal disease is to get vaccinated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends meningococcal vaccination for the following:

- All preteens and teens
- Children at increased risk for meningococcal disease
- Adults at increased risk for meningococcal disease

Visit CDC to [learn more about meningococcal vaccination](#).

Where can I get additional information?

- Your health care provider
- NJ Department of Health website nj.gov/health/cd
- Protect Me With 3+ protectmewith3.com
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cdc.gov/meningococcal

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.