

Invasive Meningococcal Disease

Frequently Asked Questions

What is invasive meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal Disease is a serious illness caused by a type of bacteria (germs) called *Neisseria meningitidis*. The disease can cause 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 infected may die. Others may experience long-term complications such as:

- Brain damage
- Learning problems
- Hearing loss
- Skin scarring
- Loss of arms and/or legs

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Although meningococcal disease can affect people of all ages, infants, preteens, teens, and young adults have the highest rates in the United States. College students and military recruits are also at increased risk because they often live in crowded settings such as dormitories or barracks. People with certain medical conditions or weakened immune systems, including those with a damaged or removed spleen, are also at higher risk.

How do people get meningococcal disease?

The bacteria spread from person to person through saliva (spit), coughing, or sneezing. Close or prolonged contact with an infected person's secretions is usually required for exposure.

Examples of close contact include:

- Kissing
- Sharing items that come into contact with the mouth, such as:
 - Water bottles
 - Eating utensils
 - Cigarettes or vaping devices
 - Lip balm or other cosmetics
- Living in the same household
- Sleeping in the same residence or during sleepovers

About 1 in 10 people carry meningococcal bacteria in their nose or throat without becoming sick. These individuals are called carriers and can still spread the bacteria to others. Since many people carry the bacteria, most cases of meningococcal disease occur randomly and are not linked to other cases.

Can people with meningococcal disease pass the illness to others?

A person with meningococcal disease can spread the bacteria from seven days before symptoms begin until 24 hours after starting antibiotics. People who had close contact with the infected person during this time may be at increased risk of developing the disease.

Close contacts should receive antibiotics to help prevent infection, regardless of vaccination status. Meningococcal bacteria are not spread through casual contact, such as being in the same classroom or workplace as an infected person. These bacteria are also less contagious than the viruses that cause the common cold or flu.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms may include:

- Fever and chills
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light
- Rapid breathing
- Fatigue
- Confusion
- A dark purple rash (in later stages)

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

A health care provider diagnoses meningococcal disease by reviewing symptoms, performing a physical examination, and testing blood and spinal fluid samples.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Treatment should begin as soon as possible. Most people with meningococcal disease are hospitalized and treated with antibiotics. It is important to complete the full course of antibiotics, even if symptoms improve, unless otherwise directed by a health care provider. Depending on the severity of the infection, additional treatments may be needed, including breathing support, medications to treat low blood pressure, and wound care for damaged skin.

How can meningococcal disease be prevented?

The best way to prevent meningococcal disease is through vaccination. Three types of meningococcal vaccines are currently available in the United States: MenACWY, MenB, and MenABCWY. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) recommend routine MenACWY vaccination for:

- All preteens: 11–12 years of age
- All teens: 16 years of age (booster dose)

Children and adults at high risk may also receive meningococcal vaccines.

Where can I get additional information?

- Health care providers
- Local health departments: localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health: nj.gov/health/cd
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases: nfid.org/infectious-disease/meningococcal/

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.