



# MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE FACT SHEET



## **WHAT IS MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS?**

Meningitis is an infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by different kinds of organisms including bacteria and viruses. When caused by bacteria, meningitis is a very serious infection and requires treatment with antibiotics. It can occur any time of the year but tends to be more common in fall and winter. Meningococcal meningitis is one form of bacterial meningitis caused by a bacterium named *Neisseria meningitidis* or “meningococcus”. Like any bacterial meningitis, rapid diagnosis and treatment are important because meningococcal meningitis can be fatal if not treated promptly.

## **DOES MENINGOCOCCUS INFECTION ALWAYS CAUSE MENINGITIS?**

No. As many as 5-10% of community members carry this bacterium in their nose or throat. But, very few of these carriers become ill (less than 1 in 1,1000). People who become ill may get meningitis, brain infection (encephalitis), blood infection (bacteremia or septicemia), joints (arthritis), or lungs (pneumonia).

## **HOW COMMON IS MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE?**

Oregon has a higher rate of meningococcal disease than most states but, even here, it is still uncommon. Currently, about 30-60 cases occur each year in Oregon—about 1-2 cases for every 100,000 Oregonians.

## **WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF MENINGITIS?**

The main symptoms of meningococcal meningitis are fever, headache, and a rapidly developing rash. Other symptoms include stiff neck, confusion, and seizures. The rash is often purple in color and appears first on the armpits, groin, ankles, and areas where pressure is applied (for example, underwear elastic waistbands and socks).

## **HOW SOON AFTER EXPOSURE DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?**

Symptoms may appear 2-10 days after exposure, but usually within 5 days.

## **WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS?**

Penicillin and certain related antibiotics are very effective in treating meningitis. These antibiotics are given by injection, and must be started promptly. With appropriate treatment, most patients recover without any problem.

## **WHO GETS MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE?**

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is more common in infants and children.

## **WHEN AND FOR HOW LONG DO INFECTED PEOPLE SPREAD THE BACTERIA?**

Until meningococcal bacteria are gone from the nose or throat, they may be transmitted to another person. The duration varies according to treatment used.

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## **HOW IS MENINGOCOCCAL BACTERIA SPREAD?**

Meningococcus is only spread by close contact with saliva or secretions from the nose or throat of an infected person. Meningococcus is not transmitted by breathing the same air as an infected person. Infected people can spread meningococcal bacteria until they have been eliminated from the nose or throat by preventive antibiotic treatment. This is usually within a week or two.

## **WHO SHOULD GET PREVENTIVE TREATMENT?**

Only people in very close contact with someone who is sick with meningococcal disease should be considered for preventive treatment. These include household members, intimate and kissing contacts, day-care center classmates, some health-care workers and people with direct contact to nose or throat secretions of someone sick with meningococcal disease. Preventive treatment can lower the risk of illness if given within 14 days of exposure. Only three antibiotics work to prevent meningococcal disease (rifampin, ciprofloxacin, or ceftriaxone). School classroom, office, and other workplace contacts usually do not have significant contact and should not be given preventive antibiotics. Meningococcus is not transmitted in water supplies, swimming pools, or by casual contact in dining rooms, bars, or restrooms.

## **IS THERE A VACCINE TO PREVENT MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS?**

There is a vaccine, but it only protects against some of the most common strains of meningococcus. The vaccine may be recommended during outbreaks or for travel to areas where high rates of disease occur. Unfortunately, the vaccine is not effective against the types of meningococcal germs most common in Oregon (and the rest of the United States). It takes at least a week before the vaccine starts to provide protection.

## **ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO REDUCE THE MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS?**

Being exposed to tobacco smoke increases the risk of developing meningitis. This is true for adults who smoke and for adults and children exposed to other people's smoke. Quitting smoking reduces the risk. Avoiding upper respiratory infections can help (for example, receiving influenza vaccine when appropriate). Taking care to cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing and frequent hand washing may be preventive as well. In addition, a balanced diet, avoiding excessive alcohol, and living a healthy lifestyle may improve your health and your ability to resist disease.