



MENINGITIS INFORMATION

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis may be caused by a virus or a bacterium. Bacterial meningitis can be quite serious and requires treatment with an antibiotic. Pneumococcus and meningococcus are the most common causes of bacterial meningitis. Meningococcal disease has recently been in the news frequently because of some deaths, but actually 85-90% of patients recover from this infection.

Viral meningitis is only rarely serious, with most patients fully recovering at home in a few days without any specific treatment.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

High fever, headache, stiff neck, and acting very ill are the signs of meningitis. The stiff neck is an inability to flex the neck and touch the chin to the chest. The back of the neck is painful not the front. These symptoms can develop over several hours or may take 1-2 days. Infants and children under two years of age may not demonstrate the stiff neck, but will be lethargic and irritable. A stiff neck without a fever is not seen with bacterial meningitis.

How is meningitis diagnosed?

If all of the above symptoms are present, the patient should see their physician promptly. An exam can usually tell if meningitis is suspected and, if so, a spinal tap is performed. The spinal fluid is then tested for the presence of an infection.

Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. Appropriate antibiotic treatment reduces the risk of dying from the usual forms of bacterial meningitis to less than 10-15%.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e. kissing, sharing drinks, sports bottles or lipstick, and direct coughing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis (including meningococcus) are as contagious as things like the common cold or flu, and they are **NOT** spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. There seems to be no increased risk from being around someone else who was exposed to a meningitis patient.

As a general precaution against all contagious diseases, including meningitis, your child should learn the importance of not sharing foods, drinks, or using eating utensils or sports bottles that have been used by others. Everyone should wash their hands frequently, especially after using the restroom and before eating.

Sometimes meningococcus can spread to other people who have had close or prolonged contact with a meningococcal meningitis patient. People in the same household or day care center or anyone with direct contact with such a patient's oral secretions within the past week would be considered at increased risk. Such people should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease.

Are there vaccines against meningitis?

Yes, infants receive vaccines against Hib and pneumococcal meningitis.

There is also a vaccine that protects against 4 strains of meningococcus. However, it is not routinely used in the United States as it is not effective in children under age 2, does not cover all strains, and immunity does not last long. It is not effective against type B, the strain that caused two cases at Folsom High School. It is now recommended only in high-risk situations, such as college students living in a dormitory.

This information was taken mostly from the Center for Disease Control website www.cdc.gov