



Fact Sheet: Bacterial Meningitis

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What is Bacterial Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Bacteria and viruses can cause meningitis. Bacterial meningitis is extremely serious. It may result in brain damage, hearing loss, learning disability or death. It is important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis. Antibiotics can prevent some types of bacteria from infecting other people. The earlier the treatment starts the more successful it is.

The two most common meningitis causing bacteria are: *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcal meningitis) and *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal meningitis). Meningitis caused by *Haemophilus influenzae* type B (Hib) is much less common now that the Hib vaccine is given to all children as part of routine immunizations.

What are the symptoms?

- Severe headache
- Stiff neck and back
- Nausea and vomiting
- High fever
- Mental confusion
- Photophobia

Symptoms may appear 3 to 7 days after exposure and can appear quickly or over several days. Some people can be infected with the bacteria and have no symptoms at all.

How is Bacterial Meningitis spread?

Bacterial meningitis can spread by direct person to person contact with the nasal discharge or saliva of an infected person through kissing, drinking from a common container, or sharing eating utensils.

Bacteria can also spread through exposure to droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People in the same household, daycare center, or anyone with direct contact with an infected person's oral secretions are at increased risk of becoming infected.

How is Bacterial Meningitis treated?

A person diagnosed with bacterial meningitis generally requires hospitalization for intravenous (IV) antibiotic therapy. Individuals who are household members or other intimate contacts to the ill person may need treatment with a very short course of antibiotics to prevent development of disease.

How is Bacterial Meningitis prevented?

- Completing the recommended vaccine schedule is the best way to protect against certain types of bacterial meningitis.
- Maintain healthy habits. Do not smoke and avoid cigarette smoke. Get plenty of rest and do not come in close contact with people who are sick. This is very important for infants, the elderly, and people with weak immune systems, since they are at higher risk.
- A person should always wash their hands after blowing his/her nose, coughing, or sneezing. Do not share drinking glasses, water bottles or eating utensils with others.
- If someone develops signs or symptoms of meningitis, or think they have been exposed, he/she should see their doctor or go to an emergency room immediately for evaluation.

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