

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection. When this bacteria affects the meninges (a thin layer of tissue covering the brain and spinal cord), it is called meningococcal meningitis. When the infection occurs in the blood it is called meningococemia. It is a relatively rare disease and usually occurs as a single case. Clusters of cases or outbreaks are rare in the United States.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

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

How is the germ that causes this disease spread?

The meningococcus germ is spread by direct close contact with nose or throat discharges of an infected person. Many people carry the germ in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Although most people exposed to the meningococcus germ do not become seriously ill, some may develop fever, headache, vomiting and a rash. In some cases, meningococcal disease may get worse very quickly and lead to severe illness and even death.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear 2 to 10 days after exposure, but usually within 3 to 4 days.

When and for how long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

A person may pass the germ from the time he/she is first infected until the germ is no longer present in discharges from the nose and throat. Persons are usually no longer infectious after 24 hours of effective antibiotic treatment.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Ceftriaxone or penicillin are drugs usually given for cases of meningococcal disease. Other drugs which are effective in treating meningococcal disease are also available.

Should people who have been in contact with a person with meningococcal disease be treated?

Only people who have been in close contact (household members, intimate contacts, child care center or nursery school playmates, health care personnel performing mouth to mouth rescue breathing) need to be considered for preventive treatment with rifampin. Casual contact as might occur in a regular classroom office or factory setting is not usually significant enough to cause concern.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal meningitis?

Presently, there is a vaccine that will protect against four of the strains of meningococcus, but it is only recommended in outbreak situations, for individuals with specific medical conditions, or for travel to areas of the world where the disease is more common.