



Bacterial Meningitis

What is it?

Bacterial meningitis is an infection in the fluid of the spinal cord, and in the lining around the brain. It is more common in winter and spring. Infants are a highest risk for this illness, followed by teenagers.

What are the symptoms?

Bacterial meningitis can cause a high fever, headaches and a stiff neck. A person might also have nausea, vomiting, confusion, irritability and sleepiness. A person with meningitis may have difficulty looking into bright lights. A rash consisting of red spots that do not disappear when pressed on may also be visible. These symptoms can develop over several hours up to 2 days. It leads to death in 8-15% of people with the illness. Hearing loss, brain damage and loss of limbs occurs in 10-20% of those who survive.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of bacterial meningitis can appear 2-10 days after exposure to the bacteria. The most common time frame is 3-4 days.

How is it spread?

Not all types of bacterial meningitis are contagious. Certain types of these bacteria can spread from person to person by direct contact with the person's saliva by sharing drinks, eating utensils, cigarettes and through kissing. It is not as contagious as the common cold or the flu.

How long is it contagious?

For the types of bacterial meningitis that are contagious, the person is contagious until 24 hours after the appropriate antibiotic therapy.

How is it diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made by a blood test or by taking a sample of spinal fluid. Treatment varies depending on the type of bacteria identified.

What bacteria cause Bacterial Meningitis?

It is important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Bacterial meningitis is most common in young children but does occur in adults. Any bacteria can cause meningitis, but the three most common causes of illness are;

- Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) – leading cause of meningitis before the 1990's
- Streptococcus pneumonia (pneumococcal meningitis)
- Neisseria meningitidis (meningococcal meningitis)

What is the treatment?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of antibiotics based on the type of bacteria found. Treatment should be started early in the illness to improve the outcome.



What is Public Health's role when someone has bacterial meningitis in the community?

Public Health is notified when someone has been diagnosed with bacterial meningitis. Close contacts will be identified and contacted by a public health nurse to identify the type of meningitis and if it is contagious. Close contacts would include people in the same household, daycare center and those who had direct contact with that person's saliva (for example a romantic partner). The public health nurse will provide close contacts with specific recommendations.

Classmates (unless close friends) and co-workers who have had casual contact with the infected person do not require antibiotics.

This information is intended to provide general health-related information about bacterial meningitis. It is not intended to replace medical consultation by your physician and/or other health care professionals.

Who should receive preventative treatment?

When a case of meningitis is reported to Public Health, public health nurses must wait for the type of meningitis to be identified in order to determine if it is contagious. Close contacts who may have been exposed to the disease will be contacted and given specific recommendations and advice about antibiotics to prevent them from contracting the disease. Close contacts are people in the same household or day-care centre, or anyone with direct contact with the person's saliva or oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) would be considered a risk of becoming infected. People (such as classmates or co-workers) who have had casual contact with an infected person do not need antibiotics to prevent meningitis.

Vaccination to prevent meningitis may also be recommended for those exposed to *Neisseria meningitidis*.

Adapted with permission of Niagara Region Public Health



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