



Meningococcal Meningitis

What is it?

Meningitis and meningococemia are two rare but serious infections caused by bacteria called neisseria meningitidis. The bacteria enter the body through the nose and throat and may cause an infection of the bloodstream (meningococemia) and/or an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). Rapid medical assessment and treatment are necessary and even with improved antibiotics and intensive care units, 8% to 15% of infected persons will die. Ten to 20% of survivors will suffer long-term health effects (hearing loss, loss of limb, decreased mental function).

What does it look like?

Symptoms can include sudden high fever, nausea and vomiting, severe headache, stiff neck, eyes sensitive to light and a skin rash of tiny, bright, red spots.

Symptoms occur within two to 10 days (usually three to four days) after the person has been exposed. Symptoms begin suddenly and progress rapidly to severe illness.

How is it spread?

Some people may carry these bacteria in their nose and throat without becoming ill. They are healthy carriers. The bacteria, found in saliva and mucus, can be spread from person to person by direct contact (kissing, sharing eating utensils, drink containers, lipstick, cigarettes or musical instruments with mouth-pieces). Why some people are healthy carriers of the bacteria and others get very sick is unknown.

Who should receive preventive antibiotics?

When a case of meningococcal disease is reported to the Medical Officer of Health, Health Unit staff will quickly identify and contact persons who may have been exposed to the disease and provide specific recommendations to them. Preventive antibiotics are usually recommended for household and close, intimate contacts of an infected person. Classmates, co-workers or other persons who have had only casual contact with an infected person, usually do not need preventive antibiotics.

Recommended absence

An infected person is no longer contagious after 24 hours of antibiotic therapy.

This disease must be reported to the Medical Officer of Health as required by Health Protection and Promotion Act.

For more information, please contact a member of Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit's Communicable Disease Team.