

Bacterial Meningitis:

What is meningitis? Meningitis is an inflammation of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by viruses, parasites, fungi, and bacteria. Viral meningitis is the most common and the least serious. Bacterial meningitis is the most common form of serious bacterial infection with the potential for serious, long-term complications. It is an uncommon disease, but requires urgent treatment with antibiotics to prevent permanent damage or death.

What are the symptoms? Someone with meningitis will become very ill. The illness may develop over one or two days, but it can also rapidly progress in a matter of hours. Not everyone with meningitis will have the same symptoms.

Children (over 1 year old) and adults with meningitis may have a severe headache, high temperature, vomiting, sensitivity to bright lights, neck stiffness or joint pains, and drowsiness or confusion. In both children and adults, there may be a rash of fine, red-purple spots. These can occur anywhere on the body.

The diagnosis of bacterial meningitis is based on a combination of symptoms and laboratory results.

How serious is bacterial meningitis? If it is diagnosed early and treated promptly, the majority of people make a complete recovery. In some cases it can be fatal or a person may be left with a permanent disability.

How is bacterial meningitis spread? Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as diseases like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. The germs live naturally in the back of our noses and throats, but they do not live for long outside the body. They are spread when people exchange saliva (such as kissing; sharing drinking containers, utensils, or cigarettes).

The germ **does not** cause meningitis in most people. Instead, most people become **carriers** of the germ for days, weeks or even months. The bacteria rarely overcome the body's immune system and cause meningitis or another serious illness.

How can bacterial meningitis be prevented? Do not share food, drinks, utensils, toothbrushes or cigarettes. Limit the number of persons you kiss.

Meningococcal Vaccine: Two Meningococcal vaccines are available in the U.S.: Meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPSV4) has been available since the 1970s; and Meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV4) licensed in 2005. Both vaccines can prevent 4 types of meningococcal disease, including 2 of the 3 types most common in the U.S. Meningococcal vaccines cannot prevent all types of the disease, but they do protect people who might become sick if they didn't get the vaccine. Both vaccines work well and protect about 90% of those who get it. Meningococcal vaccine is recommended for all children at their routine preadolescent physician visit (11-12 years of age.) For those who have never gotten a meningococcal vaccine previously, a dose is **required** for seventh grade entry.

What should you do if you think you or a friend might have bacterial meningitis? Seek prompt medical attention.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Your school nurse, family doctor, and the staff at your local or regional health department office are excellent sources for information on all communicable diseases. You may also call your local health department or Regional Texas Department of Health office to ask about meningococcal vaccine. Additional information may also be found at the web sites for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov and the Texas Department of Health: www.dshs.state.tx.us.