

BACTERIAL MENINGITIS FACT SHEET

What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord that can be caused by several different types of bacteria, as well as viruses and fungi. Some of the most common causes of bacterial meningitis include *Neisseria meningitidis*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Haemophilus influenzae* (most often type b), group B *Streptococcus*, and *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Who can get bacterial meningitis?

Anyone can get bacterial meningitis, but the following groups may be at increased risk: 1) infants, 2) college students living in dormitories, 3) military personnel, 4) persons with certain diseases, medications, and surgical procedures that may weaken the immune system, 5) persons frequently exposed to meningitis-causing bacteria because of their occupation, and 6) travelers to regions of Africa where meningitis is common.

What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

The symptoms of bacterial meningitis include a sudden fever, headache, and stiff neck. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity of the eyes to bright lights, and confusion. In newborns and infants, fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect. The infant may appear slow or inactive, irritable, vomit, or feed poorly. As the disease progresses, severe symptoms such as seizures or coma can occur. Anyone who thinks they may have meningitis should see a health care provider as soon as possible.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally develop 3-7 days after exposure.

How do the bacteria that cause meningitis spread?

It depends on the type of bacteria. Bacterial meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* or *Haemophilus influenzae* can be spread by droplets of saliva or mucus from the mouth, nose, or throat of an infected person, usually when the person coughs or sneezes. Spread of the bacteria usually occurs after very close contact or contact

for a long period of time with an infected person in the same household, daycare center, college dormitory, or military barrack. The bacteria can also spread through direct contact with an infected person's oral secretions (such as by kissing, sharing eating/drinking utensils, or sharing cigarettes). The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. Other meningitis-causing bacteria are not spread person-to-person, but can cause disease because a person has certain risk factors (such as a weak immune system), or can spread by eating contaminated food. Tell your health care provider if you may have been exposed to someone with meningitis.

Should a person with bacterial meningitis be isolated?

Yes. Isolation is recommended for the first 24 hours after antibiotics have been given.

How can the spread of bacterial meningitis be prevented?

Antibiotics or vaccination may be recommended by a health care provider or local health department for close contacts of a person with meningitis caused by certain bacteria to decrease their disease risk.

Is there a vaccine for bacterial meningitis?

Yes. There are vaccines against 3 types of bacteria that cause meningitis: *Neisseria meningitidis*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b.

How is bacterial meningitis treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated effectively with antibiotics. Due to the seriousness of the infection, treatment should be started as soon as possible.

Where can I get more information?

Information about bacterial meningitis and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.