



Bacterial Meningitis

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain, spinal fluid, and spinal cord.

What causes bacterial meningitis?

Many different kinds of bacteria (germs) can cause meningitis. Some viruses can also cause meningitis. A sample of spinal fluid is needed to find out if someone has meningitis, and to see what type of germ caused it.

What kinds of bacteria can cause meningitis?

Neisseria meningitidis are bacteria that usually infect the very young and the very old, but they can cause illness in people of any age. At any time, between 5-20% of people carry these bacteria in their throats without getting sick. The bacteria are spread through saliva (spit) during kissing, sharing of food, drinks or cigarettes, and sneezing or coughing. People who have come in close contact with the saliva of a person with meningitis from this type of bacteria may need to take antibiotics for protection. This type of meningitis is also called “meningococcal.” There is a vaccine, called meningococcal vaccine, which can be used in certain groups of people to help prevent meningococcal meningitis.

Haemophilus influenzae type b, called Hib, can also cause meningitis. There is a vaccine called “Hib vaccine” that prevents infants and young children from getting Hib disease. Most adults are resistant to this type of meningitis, and thanks to the vaccine, most children under 5 years of age are protected too. Certain people who have come in close contact with the saliva of a person with meningitis from this type of bacteria may need to take antibiotics for protection.

Streptococcus pneumoniae are bacteria that can cause “pneumococcal” meningitis. These bacteria are commonly found in the throat. Most people who carry these bacteria in their throats remain healthy. However, people with chronic medical problems or with weakened immune systems, and those who are very young or very old, are at high risk for getting pneumococcal meningitis. Meningitis caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* is not contagious (spread from person to person). People in close contact with someone who has pneumococcal meningitis do not need to get antibiotics. However, there are 2 vaccines that can protect people against infections caused by these bacteria.

Other bacteria can also cause meningitis, but meningitis from these other bacteria is rare and not thought to be contagious.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis may appear suddenly. Fever, severe and persistent headache, stiff neck or neck pain, nausea and vomiting, and rash can all be signs of meningitis. Changes in behavior such as confusion, sleepiness, and being hard to wake up can also be important symptoms. In some infants, the only signs of meningitis may be crankiness or tiredness and lack of appetite. Babies with meningitis usually run a fever, but exceptions can occur. Anyone who has these symptoms should see a doctor right away.

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How is meningitis spread?

Many of the viruses that cause meningitis are spread through saliva or feces. The bacteria that can cause meningitis are usually spread through contact with infected saliva. Most people may already have immunity (natural protection) against many of these germs. Most of the germs that cause meningitis can spread from person to person, but they will not always cause illness just by getting into the throat.

How can meningitis be prevented?

If a person is exposed to the saliva of someone with meningitis caused by certain types of bacteria, public health officials or your doctor may recommend an antibiotic to prevent disease. Frequent handwashing with soap and water can help prevent the spread of many viruses and bacteria. Not sharing food, drinks, or eating utensils with other people can also help stop the spread of germs. In addition, there are vaccines to protect against several different types of meningitis.

