

Meningitis Information Sheet

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether the meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability, even death.

Signs and symptoms are: high fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. Seizures may occur if the disease progresses. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, you should see a doctor immediately.

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. **BUT, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT TREATMENT BE STARTED EARLY IN THE COURSE OF THE DISEASE.**

Bacterial form of meningitis can be contagious. The bacteria are spread through respiratory and throat secretions, such as, coughing, kissing, sharing water bottles, sharing cigarettes, sharing chapstick, and lipstick. Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things 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. People in the same household or anyone with direct contact with a person's oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) would be considered at increased risk.

College freshman, especially those who live in dormitories are at higher risk for meningococcal disease and should be educated about the availability of a safe and effective vaccine which can decrease their risk. Contact your immunization provider for information regarding the vaccine and appointments.

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