

Meningococcal infection

Meningococcal infection is a severe but uncommon infection caused by a germ called *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as meningococcus. There are several types of meningococcal bacteria that cause disease in humans. Most cases of meningococcal disease worldwide are caused by types A, B, C, W and Y. Vaccination against these types is available under the Australian National Immunisation Program to give extra protection to people who are most at risk of meningococcal disease.

Meningococcal infection can cause meningitis (infection of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord). The germ can also infect the blood, joints, eyes, lungs and skin. Symptoms in infants and young children include fever, refusing feeds, fretfulness, vomiting, a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises, a high-pitched or moaning cry, and pale or blotchy skin. The child may be difficult to wake up.

Meningococcal blood infections (septicaemia) can cause shock and death within hours of symptoms starting. In Australia, 5–10% of people infected with meningococcus die, even if they are treated promptly. Meningococcal disease can affect anyone; however, those at higher risk include infants, small children, adolescents and young adults.

How it spreads

The meningococcal germ is found in the nose and throat of up to 1 in 10 people, where the germs are almost always harmless. In a few people, for reasons that are not clear, the germ spreads into the bloodstream and can cause very serious disease.

A person can be infected if they:

- are in close contact with an infected person for a long time
- breathe in droplets when an infected person breathes, coughs or sneezes on them.

The germs do not spread by contact with saliva from the front of the mouth. For example, sharing drinks or eating utensils does not spread meningococcus, even if a person is carrying it in the back of their throat.

Vaccination against meningococcal infection is available through the Australian National Immunisation Program and is free for eligible people most at risk.

Exclusion period

Exclude until the person has completed antibiotic treatment.

Actions for educators and other staff

Contact your local public health unit for advice if you have a case of meningococcal disease in your service. In New South Wales and the Northern Territory, education and care services must notify their local public health unit about any cases of meningococcal disease in the service.

Contact your local public health unit for advice about antibiotics and/or vaccination for people who were in the same room as the person with meningococcal disease.

Seek urgent medical attention for any person with any of the signs of meningococcal infection, such as rapid onset of illness, or a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises.

Ensure staff and children have good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Actions for parents and carers

If your child is at risk, make sure your child is vaccinated against meningococcal infection.

Contact your doctor immediately if your child shows any of the signs of meningococcal infection, such as rapid onset of illness, or a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises.

Keep your child at home for the required period, or longer, until they feel well.

Your doctor can tell you if very close contacts (such as family members) of someone with meningococcal disease need to take antibiotics to kill any germs they may be carrying. Usually, all very close contacts are treated because there is no easy and quick way of finding out who is the carrier.

More information about meningococcal infection

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of meningococcal infection (healthdirect.gov.au/meningococcal-disease).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.