



## BACTERIAL MENINGITIS

### What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis, sometimes referred to as spinal meningitis, is an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. There are many causes, including viruses, fungi, or bacteria. Viral meningitis can be serious, but most individuals fully recovery within several days. On the other hand, bacterial meningitis can result in severe with life-threatening complications. The three most common types of bacteria that cause bacterial meningitis are: *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, *Neisseria meningitidis*, and *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria.

### What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

In persons over 2 years old, high fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of bacterial meningitis. These symptoms can develop over a couple of hours, or they may take up to two days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, mental confusion, and lethargy. In infants symptoms may be difficult to detect. They may only appear less active or irritable. Infants and young children may also experience vomiting or problems eating or feeding. A classic sign of Meningococcal meningitis (caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*), may also include a purple bruise-like rash on the body, especially near the armpits, hands, or feet.

### How is bacterial meningitis spread?

The bacteria are spread through direct close contact with the discharges of the nose or throat of an infected person. The bacteria are not spread through casual contact such as shaking hands or standing in the grocery line with an ill person. However, persons in close or prolonged contact with someone with symptoms of bacterial meningitis may be at higher risk of becoming ill. This includes people in the same household or daycare center, or anyone with direct contact with discharges from a meningitis patient's mouth or nose. These types of bacteria can be easily spread through kissing, sharing eating or drinking utensils, a toothbrush, or even a cigarette. Depending on the specific organism causing the meningitis, antibiotics may be recommended for those individuals who are identified as close contacts.

### Can bacterial meningitis be treated?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a variety of different antibiotics. Diagnosis is usually made by laboratory examination of the ill person's spinal fluid. Treatment is based on a person's health history, a physical exam, and laboratory results. It's important to know that antibiotics can help prevent some types from spreading from the infected person to others.

### How can bacterial meningitis be prevented?

There are a several simple ways bacterial infections can be prevented:

- Practice proper respiratory etiquette which includes: covering of a cough or sneeze, disposal of soiled tissues, and appropriate cleaning of environmental surfaces.
- Remember: Good handwashing is essential to the prevention of the spread of germs!
- Ensure immunizations are up to date. There are safe and effective vaccines that protect against the different types of bacterial meningitis, including *Haemophilus influenza* type B, some strains of *Neisseria meningitidis*, and many types of *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. Consult your physician or the local health department for information about immunizations.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SCPH Communicable Disease Unit 330-375-2662  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))