

## **Bacterial Meningitis**

### **What is bacterial meningitis?**

Meningitis is an inflammation of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by viruses, parasites, fungi, and bacteria. Viral meningitis is common and the least serious. Bacterial meningitis is a very serious bacterial infection with the potential for long-term complications. It is an uncommon disease, but requires urgent treatment with antibiotics to prevent permanent damage or death.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Someone with meningitis will become very ill. The illness may develop over one or two days, but it can also rapidly progress in a matter of hours. Not everyone with meningitis will have the same symptoms.

Children (over 1 year old) and adults with meningitis may have a severe headache, high temperature, vomiting, sensitivity to bright lights, neck stiffness or joint pains and drowsiness or confusion. In both children and adults, there may be a rash of tiny, red-purple spots or bruises caused by bleeding under the skin. These can occur anywhere on the body.

The diagnosis of bacterial meningitis is based on a combination of symptoms and laboratory results from spinal fluid and blood.

### **What is the risk of getting bacterial meningitis?**

The risk of getting bacterial meningitis in all age groups is about 2.4 per 100,000 per year. The highest risk group is children 2 to 18 years old.

### **How serious is bacterial meningitis?**

If it is diagnosed early and treated promptly, the majority of people make a complete recovery. In some cases it can be fatal or a person may be left with a permanent disability.

### **How does bacterial meningitis spread?**

Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as diseases like the common cold or flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. The germs live naturally in the back of our noses and throats, but they do not live long outside the body. They are spread when people exchange saliva (such as kissing; sharing containers, utensils, or cigarettes).

The germ does not cause meningitis in most people. Instead, most people become carriers of the germ for days, weeks, or even months. The bacteria rarely overcome the body's immune system and cause meningitis or another serious illness.

### **How can bacterial meningitis be prevented?**

Do not share food, drinks, utensils, toothbrushes, or cigarettes. Limit the number of persons you kiss.

While there are vaccines for some other strains of bacterial meningitis, they are used only in special circumstances. These include when there is a disease outbreak in a community or for people traveling to country where there is a high risk of getting the disease. Also, a vaccine is recommended by some groups for college students, particularly freshman living in dorms or residence halls. The vaccine is safe and effective (85-90 percent). It can cause mild side effects, such as redness and pain at the injection site lasting up to two days. Immunity develops within seven to ten days after the vaccine is given and last for up to five years.

### **What should you do if you think you or a friend might have bacterial meningitis?**

You should seek prompt medical attention.

### **Where can you get more information?**

Your school nurse, family doctor, and the staff at your local or regional health department office are excellent sources for information on all communicable diseases. You may also call your local health department or Regional Texas Department of Health office to ask about meningococcal vaccine. Additional information may also be found at the web sites for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and the Department of State Health Services [www.dshs.state.tx.us](http://www.dshs.state.tx.us).