

## **MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE**

### **WHAT IS MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE?**

It is an uncommon life-threatening infection caused by bacteria that live at the back of the throat or in the nose in about 10% of the community at any given time. Although most people who carry these bacteria remain well, they can spread them to others, who in some cases can become very ill.

Meningococcal disease can occur at any time of the year but more often during winter and spring. There are different strains of meningococcal disease, with strains B and C the most common in Australia. Meningococcal C disease accounts for more than half of all meningococcal deaths in Australia.

The vaccines used in the National Meningococcal C Vaccination Program only protect against meningococcal C disease. There are other strains of meningococcal infection (e.g. caused by the B strain) that are not covered by this vaccine. At this time, there has been no effective vaccine developed for meningococcal B disease in Australia. It is important to remain alert for symptoms of meningococcal disease. Urgent medical attention should be sought if symptoms occur. See page 2 for details.

### **HOW IS IT SPREAD?**

The bacteria are spread in droplets shed from the nose or throat through coughing, sneezing and spluttering.

### **HOW EASY IS IT TO CATCH?**

Although the bacteria are spread through the droplets, it is not easy to become infected. This is because the bacteria do not survive long outside of the body.

### **WHO IS MOST AT RISK?**

Meningococcal disease can occur at any age. High risk groups include children under 5 years of age and 15 to 19 year olds.

### **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF SYMPTOMS OCCUR?**

See your doctor immediately or go straight to the nearest hospital emergency department. The diagnosis is not always easy to make in the beginning, so if the person is sent home by the doctor or hospital and the symptoms get worse or don't improve, take the person straight back to the nearest hospital.

## **MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE - THE SYMPTOMS**

A person showing the early signs of meningococcal disease might not have all of these symptoms and they might not all show at once:

- \* Sudden onset of fever
- \* Severe headache
- \* Drowsiness, confusion or coma
- \* Neck stiffness, joint pains
- \* Rash of red-purple spots or bruises
- \* Dislike of bright lights
- \* Vomiting

Additional signs to look for in babies are:

- \* Fretfulness
- \* High-pitched moaning cry
- \* Difficulty in waking baby
- \* Refusal to eat
- \* Pale or blotchy skin

## **HOW IS IT TREATED?**

People with symptoms are treated in hospital with antibiotics. Early treatment with antibiotics is the key to saving someone's life.

## **WHAT ARE THE VACCINE SIDE EFFECTS?**

The vaccines are very safe however side effects can occur. The most common are pain and redness at the injection site, irritability, headache and fever. Serious side effects are very rare. You should discuss details with your immunisation provider before vaccination.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For more general information about the National Meningococcal C Vaccination Program, visit Immunise Australia at [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au) or contact the Immunisation Infoline on 1800 671 811.

For more information or to make an appointment to see a doctor at the University of Melbourne Health Service, call (03) 8344 6904 or (03) 8344 6905.

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