**What Is Meningococcal Disease?**

Meningococcal disease is a serious disease caused by bacteria that can infect the blood or areas around the brain and spinal cord. Infection can lead to brain damage, disability, and rapid death. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important.

**What are the Symptoms?**

Symptoms include stiff neck, headache, and high fever. It is often accompanied by other symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, photophobia (increased sensitivity to light), and altered mental status (confusion). In cases of bloodstream infections, fatigue, cold hands and feet, chills, muscles aches, rapid breathing, and a dark purple rash may be present. The symptoms of meningococcal meningitis can appear quickly or over several days. Typically they develop within 3 to 7 days after exposure.

In newborns and infants, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to notice. An infant may appear to be slow or inactive, irritable, vomiting or feeding poorly. In young children, doctors may also look at the child’s reflexes, which can also be a sign of meningitis.

**How Serious is It?**

Even with antibiotic treatment, about 10% to 15% of people who get sick with meningococcal disease will die. About 15% of survivors will have long-term disabilities, such as loss of limb(s), deafness, nervous system problems, or brain damage.

**How Is It Spread?**

The bacteria are spread from person to person through air droplets. Close contact such as kissing, coughing, smoking, and living in crowded conditions (like dorms) can increase your risk of getting the disease.

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**How Can I Protect Myself?**

You can protect yourself by:

- not sharing items that have touched someone else’s mouth, such as cups, bottles, cigarettes, lip balm, and eating utensils;
- not smoking; and
- getting the meningococcal conjugate vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends one dose at age 11 or 12 and a booster dose at age 16.

**How Effective Are the Vaccines?**

Meningococcal vaccines are at least 85% effective at preventing 4 of the 5 most common forms of meningococcal disease.

Ask your healthcare provider about the benefits and risks of meningococcal vaccines.

**How Is It Treated?**

Meningococcal disease can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible.

Antibiotic treatment should reduce the risk of dying, but sometimes the infection has caused too much damage to the body for antibiotics to prevent death or serious long-term problems.

Depending on how serious the infection is, other treatments may also be necessary. These can include such things as breathing support, medications to treat low blood pressure, and wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin.

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**For More Information**

Monterey County Health Department Communicable Disease Unit
Phone: 831-755-4521
[www.mtyhd.org](http://www.mtyhd.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
[www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html)