

BACTERIAL MENINGITIS

caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

***What does it mean when a case of "bacterial meningitis" is reported?
Do other people in the community face any special risks?***

Generally, the answer is no.

Although outbreaks of this disease do occur, they're relatively uncommon. Most cases are isolated and sporadic, and they don't signal the beginning of any sort of "outbreak." It's relatively rare to see two or more related cases occurring in the same place, within the same general time frame. When they do occur, these "clusters" of illness are generally confined to some setting like a school or college.

What exactly is this disease? And how do you get it?

The illness that most people refer to as "bacterial meningitis" is caused by a type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. But *N. meningitidis* is actually only one of several disease-causing agents—including bacteria and viruses—that can cause meningitis. Meningitis is simply the name given to any illness involving an infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord. At the same time, *N. meningitidis* can also cause other very serious problems - most notably, a type of blood infection known as meningococemia. For that reason, public health people generally refer to this illness as "meningococcal disease"—which simply means disease caused by *N. meningitidis*.

At any given time, about 10-15 percent of all people are believed to carry *N. meningitidis* in their throats and nasal passages. Occasionally, in a few rare, isolated cases, the bacteria can enter the blood stream and cause illness. The reasons why this happens aren't well understood. But again, risk of this happening is very remote, and it rarely occurs as part of an "outbreak" scenario.

So not all meningitis is caused by *N. meningitidis*? And not all "meningococcal disease" is meningitis?

That's correct. There are many types of meningitis, and they can vary in severity. At the same time, meningococcal disease can be very serious—potentially even life-threatening—even when it does not involve meningitis.

How great is the risk of passing this illness from one person to another? Just how contagious is it?

N. meningitidis is found in the nose and throat. The bacteria can be spread directly from person to person in small droplets of saliva or nasal secretions. Of the people who carry the bacteria in the nose and throat, only a very few will develop disease. However, people who carry the bacteria can sometimes transmit it to others, who will in turn become sick.

How easy is it to pass the bacteria from one person to another?

Not very. It generally requires close personal contact - involving things like kissing, passing around a water bottle or a can of pop, or sharing smoking materials. Family members may also be at increased risk. But without that kind of contact, you face no special risk of getting this illness. People who have had contact with a family member or close contact of a patient with the illness, but have had no direct contact with the patient themselves, are not at increased risk of getting meningococcal disease.

It's also important to understand that the bacteria don't tend to survive very long outside the body. They can't "infect" homes or buildings, or "contaminate" physical objects. Again, people become infected through contact with other people—not simply by spending time in a building, a neighborhood, or a particular community.

Does anything need to be done if this illness appears in your community?

The risk of getting this illness is generally very low, even for people who have had close personal contact with an ill individual. However, as a precaution, they are often advised to take an antibiotic. A medication called rifampin is often used for this purpose. The number of people who've had that kind of contact is typically very small, so it's usually possible to contact each of them directly. That's usually done by your state or local health department. If you haven't been contacted—and you believe you have had sufficiently close contact with an ill individual to place yourself at risk—you should contact your health department. In those rare cases where there is evidence of a possible outbreak, public health officials may take the precaution of immunizing a particular group of people against the illness—students in a particular school, for example. Even when that step is deemed necessary, there is generally no increase in risk for the broader community.

How serious is this illness? And what are the symptoms?

While relatively rare, meningococcal disease is very serious, and potentially life-threatening. People who may have this illness should be seen by a physician. The symptoms may include fever, vomiting, headache, stiff neck, extreme sleepiness, confusion, irritability, lack of appetite, a type of rash and, in some cases, seizures. It takes approximately one to 10 days from the time a person is exposed to the bacteria until the symptoms appear.

For more information, please contact your physician or the Dickinson-Iron District Health Department.



DICKINSON-IRON DISTRICT HEALTH DEPARTMENT

www.didhd.org

***818 Pyle Drive
Kingsford, MI 49802
(906) 774 1868***

***601 Washington Avenue
Iron River, MI 49935
(906) 265 9913***