



Durham Region Health Department **Facts about...**



Meningitis

What is it?

Meningitis is an infection of the tissues covering the brain and spinal cord. There are several causes of meningitis including bacteria or viruses. Bacterial meningitis is a rare but serious infection and may be caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* or *Neisseria meningitidis*. *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) bacterial meningitis has largely been eliminated in many countries due to immunization.

Viral meningitis is also serious but often less severe than bacterial meningitis. Enteroviruses are the most common group of viruses causing meningitis. Vaccines are available to help protect against some bacteria and viruses that can lead to meningitis.

How is it spread?

Meningitis can be spread from person to person by direct contact of nose or throat secretions of an infected person. How people spread the infection depends on the type of bacteria or virus they are infected with.

Bacteria meningitis

Some people, "carriers", can have the bacteria in or on their bodies without being sick, most carriers never become sick, but they can spread the bacteria to other people. Some germs that cause bacterial meningitis can also spread through food.

Viral meningitis

Some viruses that cause viral meningitis can also spread through contaminated air or stool of someone who has the infection. People who had close contact with someone infected with the virus may become infected, but they are not likely to develop meningitis, only a small number of people get infected with the virus that caused meningitis will develop viral meningitis.

What do I Look for?

Symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis are often the same. Symptoms develop suddenly and can include high fever, severe headache, vomiting, confusion, stiff neck, rash, sensitivity to light, and drowsiness. Newborns and infants may be irritable, refuse meals, have unusual sleep patterns, and constant crying.

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How is it treated?

Bacterial meningitis is treated with antibiotics. An infected person is considered non-infectious after 24-48 hours of antibiotic treatment.

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis and most people with good immune systems completely recover on their own. Antibiotics are not useful in treating viral meningitis.

How can I protect myself?

- Wash hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow and encourage others to do the same.
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, musical instruments, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys, or anything that has been in contact with saliva, nose or throat secretions.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat secretions (i.e. after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat secretions).
- Keep up to date with immunizations and speak to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- See 'Facts About... Meningococcal C Conjugate Vaccine'
- See 'Facts About... Meningococcal Quadrivalent Conjugate Vaccine'
- See 'Facts About... Pneumococcal Disease'
- See 'Facts About... Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine'
- See 'Facts About... Pneumococcal Polysaccharide Vaccine'
- See 'Facts About... Haemophilus Influenzae Type B'
- See 'Facts About... Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio & Haemophilus Influenzae B Vaccines'
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others.

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