

Meningitis

WHAT IS MENINGITIS?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. Meningitis can be caused by either a virus or bacteria. Viral meningitis is usually less severe and can resolve without specific treatment. Bacterial meningitis can be very severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, learning disability, or death.

TREATMENT

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics. It is important for treatment to begin early in the course of the disease. With most of the common types of bacterial meningitis, antibiotic treatment can reduce the risk of dying to below 15%, although the risk is higher among the elderly.

SYMPTOMS

Common symptoms of meningitis for anyone over the age of 2 years include high fever, headache, and stiff neck. The symptoms can develop over many hours or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other possible symptoms include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking at bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness.

There may not be or it may be hard to detect the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness in babies. The baby may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly.

As the disease gets worse, people of any age may have seizures.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Is meningitis contagious (spread from person to person)?**

Yes. Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). None of the bacteria that cause meningitis are spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

However, sometimes the bacteria that cause meningitis have spread to other people who have had close or long contact with a person who has meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* (also called meningococcal meningitis) or *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib). People are now routinely vaccinated for *Haemophilus influenzae* type b or Hib.

People in the same household or daycare center, or anyone with direct contact with a person's oral secretions would be considered a close contact and would be considered at a higher risk of getting the infection. People who are close contacts of a person with meningitis caused by *N. meningitidis* should get antibiotics to keep them from getting the disease.

- **Are there vaccines against meningitis?**

Yes. There are vaccines against many types of meningitis. There are vaccines against Hib that are very safe and very effective. There are also vaccines against many other types. Meningococcal vaccines cannot prevent all types of the disease, but they do protect many people who might become sick if they did not get the vaccine.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Department of State Health Services
<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov>