

Meningococcal: Information about the Disease and Vaccines (TCA 49-6-5005)

Source: “*Meningococcal Questions and Answers*” by Immunization Action Coalition located at St. Paul, MN 55104, (www.vaccineinformation.org)

What causes meningococcal disease? Meningococcal disease is caused by the bacterium *Meisseria meningitides*. This bacterium has at least 13 different serogroups. Five of these serogroups, A, B, C, Y, and W-135, cause almost all invasive diseases. The relative importance of these five (5) subgroups depends on geographic location and other factors.

How does meningococcal disease spread? The disease is spread person-to-person through the exchange of respiratory and throats secretions (e.g., by coughing, kissing, or sharing eating utensils). Meningococcal bacteria can't live for more than a few minutes outside the body, so the disease is not spread as easily as the common cold or influenza.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease? The most common symptoms are high fever, chills, lethargy, and a rash. If meningitis is present, the symptoms will also include headache and neck stiffness (which may not be present in infants); seizures may also occur. In overwhelming meningococcal infections, shock, coma, and death can follow within several hours, even with appropriate medical treatment.

How serious is meningococcal disease? Meningococcal disease is very serious. About 9 -12 % of people with meningococcal disease die even with appropriate antibiotic treatment. Of those who recover, up to 20% suffer from serious after-effect, such as permanent hearing loss, limb loss, or brain damage.

Is there a treatment for meningococcal disease? Bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics. It is critical to start treatment early.

If a child is diagnosed with meningococcal disease, can anything be done to protect other children with whom he has contact? Individuals who have been exposed to a person with bacterial meningitis can be protected by being started on a course of antibiotics immediately (ideally within 24 hours of the patient being diagnosed). This is usually recommended for household contacts and children attending the same day care or nursery school. Older children and adults (e.g., who are in the same school or church) aren't usually considered exposed unless they have had very close contact with the infected person.

In addition to the antibiotic treatment, vaccination may be recommended for people two years of age or older if the person's infection is caused by meningococcus type A, C, Y, or W-135, all of which are contained in the meningococcal vaccine.

How is the vaccine given? One vaccine is (MPSV4) given as an injection into the fat of the arm and another vaccine is given in the muscle. The vaccine may be obtained at the office of the family doctor or local health department.

Who should get the meningococcal vaccine? MCV4 is recommended for all children and teens, ages 11 through 18 years of age. Vaccination is recommended for other people who are deemed to be at increased risk.

More information can be found at www.vaccineinformation.org and www.immunize.org.