

# Meningococcal Disease

## Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease  
Control and Prevention

An Office of the  
Department of Health and Human Services

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### What is meningococcal disease?

It is a serious illness caused by bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. These bacteria can cause:

- infection of the lining of the brain and spine
- blood infection, and rarely
- pneumonia

### How is it spread?

The bacteria are found in the nose and throat. About 10 percent of people carry it without getting sick. It spreads from person to person through small drops of spit or nasal mucus. This usually requires close personal contact such as kissing, sharing drinks or smoking materials, and performing "mouth to mouth". If the bacteria enter the blood, they will cause illness.

People living in the same house or going to the same daycare as a person with the infection are at highest risk of catching the disease. These people are often offered medicine to prevent illness.

It is not usually spread by sharing a classroom or an office with someone who is sick. Persons infected with the bacteria can spread the disease to others until 24 hours after effective treatment with antibiotics begins.

### What are the signs and symptoms?

Signs and symptoms may include:

- high fever
- headache
- stiff neck
- vomiting
- rash

Symptoms usually appear within 4 days after exposure to the bacteria (range is from 1-10 days). Getting medical care and treatment right away is very important, as this is a serious illness.

### How is it treated?

Antibiotics can be used to treat people with this disease. It is important that treatment be started early in the course of the disease.

### What if a person has contact with someone with this infection?

Only people who have been in close contact might need preventive treatment. This includes household members, intimate contacts, people performing "mouth to mouth", and daycare center playmates. People who have had contact with an infected person's spit through kissing or sharing foods or drinks are also at risk.

Close contacts that are identified should visit their healthcare provider to get a prescription for an antibiotic. The antibiotic should be taken within 24 hours of last contact.

### How is this disease diagnosed?

The bacteria are grown in a lab from a sample of blood or spinal fluid.

### Who is at risk of developing this disease?

Anyone can get it, but it is more common in infants and children. Adolescents and first-year college students living in dorms are also at increased risk. Other risk factors include:

- living in close quarters, such as dorms
- being crowded for long periods of time
- sharing eating utensils and drinking glasses
- kissing, and
- sharing smoking materials with a person who is infected

### Is there a vaccine to prevent it?

Yes, there are two types of vaccines available in the U.S. to protect against disease. The vaccines cannot prevent all types of this disease. Vaccine does protect many people who might get sick if they did not get the vaccine. Contact your healthcare provider to find out if you or someone you know could benefit from this vaccine.

### Who should get the vaccine?

Routine vaccination is recommended for:

- all children at age 11 or 12 years with a booster dose at 16 years of age
- all unvaccinated teens ages 13-18 years
- those who receive their first dose of conjugate vaccine at or after age 16 years do not need a booster dose

- U.S. military recruits
- lab workers who are routinely exposed to this bacteria at their jobs
- anyone who has a damaged spleen or whose spleen has been removed
- anyone who has certain immune system disorders
- travelers to or residents of countries where this disease is common.

**Where can I get more information?**

For more information, contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website: <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.