

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a rare but potentially fatal bacterial infection that can cause severe swelling of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or a serious blood infection (septicemia). Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious because early symptoms are similar to common viral illnesses. Symptoms may include: high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, vomiting, sensitivity to light, nausea, confusion, rash and fatigue. Symptoms may develop rapidly or over several days. The disease can be fatal in as little as a few hours. Meningococcal disease is fatal in 10-15 percent of cases. Even with antibiotic treatment, 20 percent of survivors will have serious permanent disabilities, including brain damage, loss of limbs, and deafness. Meningococcal disease is spread through direct contact with respiratory and/or oral secretions from infected persons. Increased risk of exposure is caused by activities such as kissing, sharing drinks, coughing, or living in the same house as a sick person. Teenagers and college students are at increased risk because of their lifestyle.

Meningococcal disease is at an all time low related to the wide use of the vaccine. The CDC and other leading health organizations recommend that all 11-12 year olds should be vaccinated with meningococcal conjugate vaccine. A decrease in immunity is noted after five years; therefore, a booster shot is recommended at age 16 to continue to protect through the teen aged years. Parents who have not had their child immunized should ask their healthcare provider about doing it now. Keeping up to date on the meningococcal vaccine is the best way to prevent illness.