



The fast facts about meningococcal disease and meningitis

In order to fight meningitis, you need to understand it. Here are the most important things to know:

• What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a common name for infections that take place in the membranes (called meninges) surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis can be caused by viruses and by bacteria. One of the most serious forms of meningitis is caused by bacteria known as meningococci.

• Meningococcal disease and meningitis

An infection with meningococcal bacteria causes a serious, potentially fatal infection called meningococcal disease.¹ You may have heard it referred to as bacterial meningitis. This Web site will focus on meningococcal disease, including meningitis.

Meningococcal disease can affect the meninges, causing meningitis. It can also cause a very serious condition called sepsis (also known as blood poisoning).

Each year, about 3000 people in the United States become infected with the bacteria, and as many as 1 in 10 of those people die.²

As deadly as meningococcal disease can be, most cases in the United States (up to 83 percent of cases in adolescents and young adults) could potentially be prevented by a single vaccination.^{3,4}

• Viral meningitis

Another form of meningitis is caused by a virus. Viral meningitis is serious, but usually not life-threatening. Most patients with viral meningitis get better on their own in 7 to 10 days.

• Who gets meningitis?

Even people who are usually healthy can get meningitis. However, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have shown that the risk of getting meningitis increases in teens and young adults.^{1,3}

• How does a person catch meningitis?

Although meningitis is uncommon, a person can catch it by having close personal contact with a person who is sick with the disease. There are also people who can carry the bacteria in their nose and throat but never become sick. Contact with these carriers can also cause someone to become infected with meningitis.²

Experts believe that some behaviors can put people at greater risk for getting meningitis. These include:^{2,4,5,6}

- Living in close quarters, such as college dormitories
- Being in crowded situations for prolonged periods of time
- Sharing drinking glasses, water bottles, or eating utensils
- Kissing
- Smoking or being exposed to smoke
- Activities that make people run-down and may weaken the immune system, such as staying out late and having irregular sleeping patterns

- **How can a person prevent meningitis?**

While there isn't a way to be 100 percent protected, you can help reduce the risk of getting meningitis by avoiding the behaviors that spread it. There is also a vaccination that can help prevent it. Ask your child's health-care provider about how to protect your child.

- **How is meningitis treated?**

A person with meningitis needs to be seen by a health-care provider immediately. If you think that someone you know has meningitis, get that person in for emergency care right away. If doctors suspect a patient has meningitis, they will give that person strong antibiotic medicine through an intravenous (IV) tube straight into their bloodstream.

- **How can meningococcal disease affect a person?**

Even with treatment, meningococcal disease can kill an otherwise healthy young person in 48 hours or less.^{2,7,8} The severe swelling in the brain and spinal cord, and sepsis (also known as blood poisoning) can lead to:^{2,7}

- Amputation of limbs, fingers, or toes
- Severe scarring
- Brain damage
- Hearing loss
- Kidney damage
- Emotional and psychological problems including anxiety, depression, difficulty working, and more

The lasting effects of meningococcal disease can change a person's life forever. That's why it's so important to protect people from this illness.

Provided as an educational resource by Sanofi Pasteur Inc.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Summary of notifiable diseases – United States, 1996-2002. *MMWR*. 1997;45:10; 1998;46:12; 1999;47:12; 2001;48:14-15; 2002;49:27-28; 2003;50:27-28.

² Granoff DM, Feavers IM, Borrow R. Meningococcal vaccines. In: Plotkin SA, ed. *Vaccines*. 4th ed. Philadelphia, Pa: WB Saunders Co.; 2004:959-987.

³ Harrison LH, Pass MA, Mendelsohn AB, et al. Invasive meningococcal disease in adolescents and young adults. *JAMA*. 2001;286:694-699.

⁴ Bruce MG, Rosenstein NE, Capparella JM, et al. Risk factors for meningococcal disease in college students. *JAMA*. 2001;286:688-693.

⁵ National Meningitis Association. About Meningitis. Available at: http://www.nmaus.org/about_meningitis/index.htm. Accessed June 3, 2005.

⁶ Meningitis.com. Who is at risk of contracting meningitis? Available at: <http://meningitis.com/?idcat1=13>. Accessed June 3, 2005.

⁷ Erickson L, De Wals P. Complications and sequelae of meningococcal disease in Quebec, Canada, 1990-1994. *Clin Infect Dis*. 1998;26:1159-1164.

⁸ Erickson LJ, De Wals P, McMahon J, Heim S. Complications of meningococcal disease in college students. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2001;33:737-739.