

# Meningococcal Disease Fact Sheet

Toledo-Lucas County Health Department | Emergency Preparedness



## What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease can refer to any illness caused by the type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitides*, also known as meningococcus. These illnesses are often severe and can be deadly. They include infections of the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and bloodstream infections (bacteremia or septicemia).

These bacteria spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions like spit. Doctors treat meningococcal disease with antibiotics, but quick medical attention is extremely important. Keeping up to date with recommended vaccines is the best defense against meningococcal disease.

## What causes meningococcal disease?

The bacteria called *Neisseria meningitides* causes meningococcal disease. About 1 in 10 people have these bacteria in the back of their nose and throat with no signs or symptoms of the disease.



## How does meningococcal disease spread?

People spread meningococcal bacteria to other people by sharing respiratory and throat secretions (saliva). Generally, it takes close (coughing or kissing) or lengthy contact to spread these bacteria.

Fortunately, they are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or flu. People do not catch them through casual contact or by breathing air when someone with meningococcal disease has been.

Sometimes the bacterial spreads to people who have had close or lengthy contact with a patient with meningococcal disease. Those at increased risk of getting sick include:

- People who live with the patient
- Anyone with direct contact with the patient's oral secretions, such as a boyfriend or girlfriend

## What are the signs and symptoms of Meningococcal Meningitis?

Doctors call meningitis caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitides* meningococcal meningitis. When someone has meningococcal meningitis, the bacteria infect the protective membranes covering their brain and spinal cord and cause swelling.



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The most common symptoms include:

- Sudden onset of fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Photophobia (eyes being more sensitive to light)
- Altered mental status (confusion)

The symptoms on meningococcal meningitis can appear quickly or over several days. Typically they develop within 4 days after exposure, but it can take up to 10 days in some cases.

### What are the symptoms of Meningococcal Septicemia?

Doctors call septicemia (a bloodstream infection) caused by *Neisseria meningitides* meningococcal septicemia or meningococcemia. When someone has meningococcal septicemia, the bacteria enters the bloodstream and multiplies, damaging the walls of the blood vessels/ this causes bleeding to the skin and organs. The symptoms include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Vomiting
- Cold hands and feet
- Cold chills
- Severe aches or pain in the muscles, joints, chest, or abdomen (belly)
- Rapid breathing
- Diarrhea
- In later stages, a dark purple rash

### How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

Meningococcal disease can be difficult to diagnose because the signs and symptoms are often similar to those of other illnesses. If a doctor suspects meningococcal disease, they will collect samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid (fluid near the spinal cord). Doctors then test the samples to see if there is an infection and, if so, what germ is causing it.

### What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Doctors treat meningococcal disease with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important that treatment starts as soon as possible. If a doctor suspects meningococcal disease, they will give the patients antibiotics right away. Depending on how serious the infection is, people may need other treatments including:

- Breathing support
- Medications to treat low blood pressure
- Wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin

### For more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):  
<https://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html>

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