



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Meningococcal Disease

**Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection which can very quickly become life threatening. It most commonly affects children and young adults, but all ages are at risk. Always treat symptoms of meningococcal disease as an emergency and seek medical help immediately.**

## Meningococcal disease

The bacteria that cause meningococcal disease live in the nose or throat of about 10% of people. Most of these people remain well, but they can spread the bacteria to others who in some cases become very ill.

Most cases of meningococcal disease in Australia are caused by the meningococcus bacteria strains B and C.

The two most serious forms of the disease are:

### Meningococcal meningitis

Bacteria infect the outer lining of the brain and spinal cord (the meninges). This can cause permanent damage (e.g., deafness, brain damage or death).

### Meningococcal septicaemia

Bacteria damage blood vessels, leading to bleeding into body tissues and a particular skin rash. The bacteria can cause so much damage so quickly that the infected person can die within a few hours of starting to feel ill. Sometimes the person needs finger, toe or limb amputations or is left with kidney or liver damage.

## How is it spread?

Meningococcal bacteria are spread in fluid from the nose and throat, by coughing, sneezing, spitting and close contact (e.g., kissing).

## Signs and symptoms

The start of meningococcal disease can feel like the start of the 'flu', but the person will usually get sicker much more quickly than someone who has the 'flu'.

Symptoms of meningococcal disease include:

- Sudden fever
- Severe headache
- Drowsiness, confusion or coma
- Stiff neck
- Joint and body aches
- Seizures (fits)
- Eyes sensitive to bright lights
- Vomiting, nausea or diarrhoea
- Rash of pink, red or purple spots or bruises.

Additional symptoms in babies and young children also include:

- Being irritable, unsettled and not wanting to be handled



## Important

- Someone with meningococcal disease can die within a few hours of the first symptoms.
- No vaccine provides complete protection against all strains of this disease.
- Watch for symptoms of this disease, especially a rash of red-purple spots or bruises, but do not wait for a rash – it may be the last symptom to appear or not appear at all.
- If a person has any of the symptoms resembling this disease, get them to a doctor or hospital **URGENTLY**.
- If the person is sent home, do not hesitate to return to the doctor or hospital immediately if symptoms worsen or you are still concerned.
- In an emergency phone 000 for an ambulance (or 112 from a mobile phone when out of network coverage area).

- A high-pitched moaning cry or whimpering
- A blank and staring expression
- Neck retraction with back arching
- Being difficult to wake, lethargic or limp
- Refusing to eat
- Cold hands and feet
- Pale or blotchy skin.

## Who is at risk?

The risk of catching the infection is higher in some situations including:

- Children under five years
- Adolescents and young adults (15-24 years)
- Close contact with a 'carrier' of the bacteria (e.g., in child care centres or crowded living conditions)
- Close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease
- During winter and early spring
- Smokers or inhaling smoke from others
- Recent upper respiratory tract infections (e.g., influenza)
- People with no spleen
- People with an impaired immune system.

Older people (over 45 years) have a high risk of death if they catch a meningococcal infection.

## Treatment

Meningococcal disease can be effectively treated with antibiotic injections if started quickly. Successful treatment and recovery depends mainly on recognising symptoms and getting to a doctor **urgently**.

Whenever meningococcal disease is diagnosed, the doctor must notify the state health department. People who have recently been in contact with the patient are contacted and advised to take an oral antibiotic to help protect them against meningococcal disease.

## Protection by immunisation

In Australia a vaccine (injection), which gives protection against meningococcus 'C strain' is offered free of charge to children at 12 months of age, as part of the National Immunisation Program. Others are not eligible for free vaccine, but can arrange vaccination with their doctor.

**At present there is no vaccine against meningococcus 'B strain' available in Australia.**

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

## Self care

- Have your child vaccinated against meningococcal C disease. Adults can also benefit from this protection – Ask a doctor or pharmacist.
- Be alert for the symptoms of meningococcal disease and get to a doctor or hospital **quickly** if you are worried or unsure.
- If you have been in close contact with a person who has the disease, ask a doctor about antibiotic protection.
- Always cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Never put anything in your or your child's mouth that may have been in someone else's mouth and has not been washed (e.g., eating utensils, musical instruments, pens, lipstick, baby's dummy).
- Wash hands thoroughly and regularly, especially after nappy changing and toileting and before eating or preparing food.
- Don't smoke.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

## Related fact cards

- *Childhood Immunisation*
- *Smoking series*

## For more information

**The Meningitis Centre** – Telethon Institute for Child Health Research – Phone (08) 9489 7791 Freecall 1800 250 223 or website [www.meningitis.com.au](http://www.meningitis.com.au)

**HEALTHInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Immunise Australia** – phone the Immunisation Info Line on 1800 671 811 or website [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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