



JOHNSON COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

dedicated to the prevention of disease and promotion of wellness for our community

BACTERIAL MENINGITIS: FACT SHEET

What is meningococcal meningitis?

Meningococcal meningitis is a severe bacterial infection of the bloodstream and meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord). It is a relatively rare disease and usually occurs as a single isolated event. Clusters of cases or outbreaks are also possible.

Who gets meningococcal meningitis?

Anyone can get meningitis, but it is more common in infants, children, and young adults. Also, college freshmen who live in dormitories have a slightly higher risk of getting this infection than others their age.

How is the germ that causes this type of meningitis spread?

The meningococcus germ is spread by direct close contact with nose or throat discharges from an infected person. Many people carry this germ in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Although most people exposed to the meningococcus germ do not become seriously ill, some may develop fever, headache, vomiting, stiff neck, and a rash. Up to 25 percent of patients who recover may have permanent damage to the nervous system. The disease occasionally causes death.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to 10 days after exposure, but usually within five days.

When and for how long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

From the time a person is first infected until the germ is no longer present in discharges from the nose and throat, he or she may transmit the disease. The duration varies among individuals and with the treatment used.

What is the treatment for meningococcal meningitis?

Certain antibiotics are very effective in eliminating the germ from the nose and throat. Penicillin is the drug of choice for meningitis.

Should people who have been in contact with a diagnosed case of meningococcal meningitis be treated?

Only people who have been in close contact (household members, intimate contacts, health care personnel performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, daycare center playmates) need to be considered for preventative treatment. Such people are usually advised to obtain a prescription for rifampin from their physician. Casual contact as might occur in a regular classroom, office, or factory setting is not usually significant enough to cause concern. People who think they have been exposed should contact their local health department to discuss whether they should receive preventative treatment.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal meningitis?

Presently, there is a vaccine (Menactra) that will protect against several of the strains of the meningococcus germ and is recommended for ages 11 – 18.