

Meningococcal disease: key information

Meningococcal is a serious disease that can suddenly make you very sick. If left untreated it can cause serious disability and be deadly – especially for babies, children and teenagers.

If you have symptoms get medical help urgently. Call your doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116. In an emergency call 111.



Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

The first symptoms of meningococcal disease often look like the flu. People with it can suddenly become quite unwell, sometimes in just a few hours.

Common symptoms can include:

In babies and children

- Fever
- Crying, unsettled, irritable
- Refusing drinks or feeds
- Vomiting
- Sleepy, floppy, harder to wake
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Reluctant or unable to walk
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

In adults

- Fever
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Sleepy, confused, delirious, unconscious
- Joint pains, aching muscles
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

Meningococcal is dangerous because it can cause an infection in your brain (meningitis), or an infection in your blood (septicaemia). Both of these can result in serious health complications.



Seeking medical help

If you or someone you live with has one or more of the symptoms above call your doctor straight away. You can also call Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116.

This is especially important if you've recently been in close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease, or if you suddenly become seriously unwell and have a rash.

If you or someone else has symptoms:

1. Get medical advice. Whatever time, day or night. In an emergency call 111.
2. Say what the symptoms are when you call.
3. Insist on immediate action – don't be put off – a life may be at risk.
4. Even if a person with these symptoms has been checked by a doctor, watch them carefully.
5. Do not leave them alone – they may get worse suddenly and need help urgently.
6. If they get worse go straight back to a doctor, ring Healthline again or call 111.



How the disease spreads

Meningococcal disease can be spread through coughing and sneezing, or close physical contact with someone who has it. Breathing in cigarette or vape smoke increases the risk that someone will become unwell with meningococcal disease if they have breathed in the germs.

To catch the disease you normally need to be in close contact with someone who has it for a long time. This means people living in the same home as someone with the disease are at higher risk.

There is less risk of spreading the disease through sharing food, drink bottles and cigarettes, or through brief physical contact, such as a short hug.

People at higher risk

Meningococcal disease can affect anyone of any age.

Some people have a higher risk of getting seriously sick from meningococcal disease. This includes:

- babies;
- children under five;
- teenagers and young adults.

You should be especially careful if someone in your whānau from these groups has symptoms. Make sure you get medical help if they become suddenly unwell.

Children and young adults in shared accommodation (such as boarding schools or halls of residence) are at higher risk of catching the disease. If it's recommended they get the vaccine it will be free.

Prevention

You can reduce the risk of passing on meningococcal disease by:

- Covering your nose and mouth when you sneeze and cough
- Washing and drying your hands properly
- Keeping your home smoke free inside, and not smoking or vaping
- Wearing a mask when around others or in shared spaces



If you catch the disease

If you catch meningococcal disease you will need to be treated in hospital with antibiotics. These kill the bacteria and help you recover.

If left untreated meningococcal disease can get worse very quickly and cause serious disability or even death. It's therefore important to get help as soon as possible.

Meningococcal disease can also cause long-term health complications. If you've had the disease you should speak to your doctor about your recovery.



If you're a close contact

WHO ARE CLOSE CONTACTS

You will be a close contact if (in the seven days before someone with meningococcal disease became sick) you:

- Lived in the same house as them
- Slept in the same room (for at least 1 night) as them
- Intimately kissed the person
- Sat next to them for 8 hours or longer (for example on a bus, plane or train)
- Gave them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation

WHAT CLOSE CONTACTS NEED TO DO

Close contacts do not need to isolate unless they are unwell. They should look out for the symptoms of meningococcal disease and get help urgently if they become unwell. Close contacts will be provided with antibiotics free of charge and are vaccinated against meningococcal disease. These reduce the chance of catching the disease and passing it on to others.

You can catch meningococcal disease even if you've previously been vaccinated against it. Vaccinated people should still watch out for symptoms and get help if they feel unwell.

OTHER CONTACTS

You do not need antibiotics or the vaccine if you have been near the person, but not in close contact. You should still pay close attention to any symptoms and get help quickly if you become unwell.

WHEN TO GET IN TOUCH WITH US

Get in touch with your local public health unit if you have been in close contact with someone with meningococcal disease and not heard from a health professional. In the Auckland region you can contact Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600.



For more information visit:
www.arphs.nz/meningococcal