

Know the Facts About Meningitis

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. There are two types of meningitis—viral and bacterial. Viral meningitis is usually less severe. Bacterial meningitis is serious.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

These symptoms can develop over several hours or a few days:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck

Other signs may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Rash
- Pain when looking at bright lights
- Confusion
- Irritability
- Sleepiness

HOW LONG AFTER CONTACT CAN ILLNESS DEVELOP?

Meningitis symptoms may appear several days after the child has had a cold and runny nose, or diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms can appear even if the child has not been sick. See the child's doctor for a diagnosis.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

Most forms of the infection are spread through contact with droplets from the nose, eyes or mouth of an infected person. Viral meningitis also is spread by contact with the stool of an infected person.

WHEN IS THE CHILD MOST CONTAGIOUS?

A child may be contagious before symptoms build. Keep the child away from others until at least 24 hours after antibiotics are started and fever has dropped.

WHAT ABOUT EXPOSURES?

Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as a cold or the flu. It is not always necessary to give antibiotics to those who have been around someone with meningitis. The child's doctor will determine if antibiotics are needed and who should take them.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

It is important to treat meningitis early. Meningitis is diagnosed by a spinal tap and blood tests. A child with any of the following symptoms and fever should see the doctor right away:

- Neck stiffness
- Headache
- Purple rash
- Lethargic or sluggish

A lethargic child will have one or more of the following signs:

- Does not look at you when you speak or otherwise try to get his attention, or looks at you for only a second before he looks away.
- Does not speak.
- Does not fight or pull away when gently pinched or bothered.
- Is limp, with very little movement of the arms, legs or head even when moved; will not walk, stand or sit.
- Is much sicker than he was with earlier illnesses.
- Abnormally sleepy.
- Hard to wake.

HOW CAN WE PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION?

Vaccinations can prevent most kinds of meningitis. Handwashing, throwing away soiled tissues and not sharing drinks and utensils also can lower the child's risk.

VIRAL MENINGITIS

Viral meningitis is a viral infection causing swelling of the fluid around the brain and spinal cord. It is more common than bacterial meningitis and is usually not serious. It can be caused by many different viruses. Most of the infections occur in children younger than age 5. People who get viral meningitis usually get better. Seasonal outbreaks, especially in winter months, are not unusual. Treatment of people who come in contact with the child is not needed for this type of meningitis. The child can usually go back to school as soon as symptoms are gone and he is fever-free for 24 hours.

BACTERIAL MENINGITIS

Bacterial meningitis is a serious infection of the fluid around the brain and spinal cord. About 17,500 people get sick with bacterial meningitis each year in the U.S. Many kinds of bacteria can cause it, including *Haemophilus influenzae* type B, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis*, or meningococcal meningitis, are the main causes of bacterial meningitis. Though the signs are usually the same as for viral meningitis, a child with bacterial meningitis can quickly get sick with life-threatening symptoms. A small red or purple rash is common. Immediate medical care and treatment is necessary to prevent permanent damage.

PREVENTION

There are four vaccines to help prevent certain kinds of meningitis:

- The *Haemophilus influenzae* type B vaccine (Hib) is one of the shots babies get during their regular immunizations at 2, 4, 6 and 12 to 15 months of age.
- The pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV7) is for children younger than age 2. It is one of the shots babies get during their regular immunizations at 2, 4, 6 and 12 to 15 months of age.
- The pneumococcal vaccine (PPV) is for anyone older than age 2. This vaccine may be given to high-risk children.
- The meningococcal vaccine is given to all children ages 11 to 12. It also can be given anytime during the teen years. It may be given to high-risk adults, including college students and those in the military.

Call 404-250-KIDS to speak to a pediatric nurse if you need further assistance.

This general healthcare information should not be used as a substitute or in place of contacting your child's healthcare provider.