

Meningococcal Disease and Daycare Attendees: Commonly Asked Questions

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. These bacteria can infect the tissue (the “meninges”) that surrounds the brain and spinal cord and cause meningitis, or they may infect the blood or other organs of the body. Symptoms of meningococcal disease may appear suddenly. Fever, severe and constant headache, stiff neck or neck pain, nausea and vomiting, and rash can all be signs of meningococcal disease. Changes in behavior such as confusion, sleepiness, and trouble waking up can also be important symptoms. In the US, about 350-550 people get meningococcal disease each year and 10-15% die despite receiving antibiotic treatment. Of those who survive, about 10-20% may lose limbs, become hearing impaired or deaf, have problems with their nervous system, including long term neurologic problems, or have seizures or strokes. Less common presentations include pneumonia and arthritis.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

These bacteria are passed from person-to-person through saliva (spit). You must be in close contact with an infected person’s saliva in order for the bacteria to spread. Close contact includes activities such as kissing, sharing water bottles, sharing eating/drinking utensils or sharing cigarettes with someone who is infected; or being within 3-6 feet of someone who is infected and is coughing and sneezing.

Who is most at risk for getting meningococcal disease?

High-risk groups include anyone with a damaged spleen or whose spleen has been removed, those with persistent complement component deficiency (an inherited immune disorder), HIV infection, those traveling to countries where meningococcal disease is very common, microbiologists and people who may have been exposed to meningococcal disease during an outbreak. People who live in certain settings such as college freshmen living in dormitories and military recruits are also at greater risk of disease from some of the serotypes.

Are children in daycare at increased risk for meningococcal disease?

Children under five years of age have a higher rate of meningococcal disease than older children, but daycare is **not** considered to increase risk for meningococcal disease.

Is there a vaccine against meningococcal disease?

Yes, there are 2 different meningococcal vaccines. Quadrivalent meningococcal conjugate vaccine (Menactra and Menveo) protects against 4 serotypes (A, C, W and Y) of meningococcal disease. Meningococcal serogroup B vaccine (Bexsero and Trumenba) protects against serogroup B meningococcal disease, for people age 10 and older.

Should my child receive meningococcal vaccine?

At the current time, routine vaccination with meningococcal vaccine is **not** recommended for healthy pre-school children who are not in one of the high-risk groups. Parents of children who are at higher risk of infection, because of certain medical conditions or other circumstances (see above, “Who is most at risk?”), should discuss vaccination with their child’s healthcare provider.

How can I protect my child from getting meningococcal disease?

The best protection against meningococcal disease and many other infectious diseases is thorough and frequent handwashing, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette. Individuals should:

1. wash their hands often, especially after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food (hands should be washed with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand gel or rub may be used if hands are not visibly dirty);
2. cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue in a trash can; or if they don’t have a tissue, cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve.
3. not share food, drinks or eating utensils with other people, especially if they are ill.
4. contact their healthcare provider immediately if they have symptoms of meningococcal disease.

If your child is exposed to someone with meningococcal disease, antibiotics may be recommended to keep your child from getting sick.

You can obtain more information about meningococcal disease or vaccination from your healthcare provider, your local Board of Health (listed in the phone book under government), or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Divisions of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph.