

Meningococcal Disease*



What is Meningococcal Disease?

This is a serious disease caused by bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. Fortunately, these bacteria are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or flu. People do not catch the bacteria through casual contact or by breathing air where someone with meningococcal disease has been. It requires close contact over a period of time, or direct contact such as kissing or sharing drinks.

How do persons get infected with Meningococcal Disease?

People spread meningococcal bacteria to other people by sharing respiratory and throat secretions (saliva or spit). Generally, it takes close (for example, coughing or kissing) or lengthy contact to spread these bacteria. Fortunately, they are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or the flu. People do not catch the bacteria through casual contact or by breathing air where someone with meningococcal disease has been.

Sometimes the bacteria spread to people who have had close or lengthy contact with a patient with meningococcal disease. Those at increased risk of getting sick include:

- People in the same household
- Roommates
- Anyone with direct contact with the patient's oral secretions, such as a kissing partner

Close contacts of someone with meningococcal disease should receive antibiotics to help prevent them from getting the disease. Experts call this prophylaxis (pro-fuh-lak-sis). This does not mean that the contacts have the disease; the antibiotics are given to prevent them from becoming ill. Health departments investigate each case of meningococcal disease to identify all close contacts and make sure they receive prophylaxis. People who are not a close contact of someone with meningococcal disease do not need prophylaxis.

What are the symptoms of Meningococcal Disease?

Early symptoms of the disease include fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, light sensitivity, confusion, and rash. Anyone who has been exposed or develops symptoms should be evaluated by a health care provider immediately. This is a rare but potentially devastating disease. **However, it can be prevented and treated. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect against meningococcal disease.**

How can Meningococcal Disease infection be diagnosed?

Meningococcal disease can be difficult to diagnose because the signs and symptoms are often similar to those of other illnesses. If a doctor suspects meningococcal disease, they will collect samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid (fluid near the spinal cord). Doctors then send the samples to a laboratory for testing. If *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria are in the samples, laboratorians can culture (grow) the bacteria. Growing the bacteria in the laboratory allows doctors to know the specific type of bacteria that is causing the infection. Knowing this helps doctors decide which antibiotic will work best. Other tests can sometimes detect and identify the bacteria if the cultures do not.

What are some tips for preventing Meningococcal Disease?

While everyone should take prevention seriously, the following high-risk groups should consider vaccination with a meningococcal conjugate (MenACWY) vaccine:

- College and university students;
- Immunocompromised individuals;
- People living with HIV;
- [Men who have sex with men](#);
- People in any groups listed above who received their MenACWY vaccine more than 5 years ago.

DOH Santa Rosa offers meningococcal vaccines. For more information, visit santarosa.floridahealth.gov or call 850-983-5200 and click option 2.

How is Meningococcal Disease infection treated?

Doctors treat meningococcal disease with a number of antibiotics. It is important that treatment start as soon as possible. If a doctor suspects meningococcal disease, they will give the person antibiotics right away.

Antibiotics help reduce the risk of dying. Depending on how serious the infection is, people with meningococcal disease may need other treatments, including:

- Breathing support
- Medications to treat low blood pressure
- Surgery to remove dead tissue
- Wound care for parts of the body with damaged skin

For more information about meningococcal disease, please visit the [CDC website](#).