

# Fact Sheet: Bacterial Meningitis

## What is Bacterial Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Bacteria and viruses can cause meningitis. Bacterial meningitis is generally more severe and may require hospitalization. There are many different bacteria that can cause meningitis but the two most common are: *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcal meningitis) and *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal meningitis). Meningitis caused by *Haemophilus influenzae type B* (Hib) is much less common now that the Hib vaccine is given to all children as part of routine immunizations.

## What are the symptoms?

- Severe headache
- Stiff neck and back
- Nausea and vomiting
- High fever
- Mental confusion
- Bulging soft spot on baby's head (fontanelle)

Symptoms may appear 3 to 7 days after exposure. Symptoms can appear quickly or over several days. Some people can be infected with the bacteria and have no symptoms at all.

## How is it treated?

A person diagnosed with bacterial meningitis generally requires hospitalization for intravenous (IV) antibiotic therapy. Individuals who are household members or other intimate contacts to the ill person may need treatment with a very short course of antibiotics to prevent development of disease.

## How is it spread?

The bacteria that can cause meningitis are usually spread by direct person-to-person contact with the nasal discharge or oral secretions (saliva) of an infected person through kissing, drinking from a common container, or sharing eating utensils. They can also be spread through exposure to droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People in the same household or daycare center, or anyone with direct contact with an infected person's oral secretions are at increased risk of becoming infected.

## How is bacterial meningitis prevented?

- The best way to protect you and your child against certain types of bacterial meningitis is to complete the recommended vaccine schedule. There are vaccines for three types of bacteria that can cause meningitis:
  - *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcus)
  - *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcus)
  - *Haemophilus influenzae type B* (Hib)
- Maintain healthy habits. Do not smoke, and avoid cigarette smoke. Get plenty of rest and do not come in close contact with people who are sick. This is very important for infants, the elderly, and people with weak immune systems, since they are at higher risk.
- Always wash your hands after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. Do not share drinking glasses, water bottles or eating utensils.
- If you (or your child) develop signs or symptoms of meningitis, or if you think you have been exposed, call or see your doctor or go to the emergency room immediately for evaluation.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*

