

# Fact Sheet: Bacterial Meningitis

## What is Bacterial Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Bacteria or 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 three most common are: *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcal meningitis), *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal meningitis), and *Haemophilus influenzae type B* (Hib).

## What are the symptoms?

- Severe headache
- Stiff neck and back
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever and chills
- Mental confusion
- Bulging soft spot on baby's head (fontanelle)
- Progress to unresponsiveness, coma and possibly death, if untreated

Symptoms may appear 3 to 4 days after exposure, and are sudden in onset. However, some people can be infected with the bacteria and have no symptoms at all.

*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 call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.*

## How is it spread?

The bacteria that can cause meningitis are usually spread by direct 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.

## 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 bacterial meningitis prevented?

- Always wash your hands after touching any nasal or oral secretions.
- 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.
- A vaccine that prevents *Haemophilus meningitis* (Hib vaccine) is now given to all children as part of routine childhood immunization. A pneumococcal vaccine (Pneumovax) is given to infants and can prevent pneumococcal meningitis.
- A vaccine for meningococcal meningitis is available and recommended for children 11-12 years old, children entering high school and college freshman living in a dormitory.