Meningococcal infection patient information

What is a meningococcal infection?
Meningococcal infection is sometimes called meningococcal disease. It is caused by bacteria called *Neisseria meningitides*, which have many subtypes. These are referred to as ‘groups’. In Victoria, infection is usually caused by meningococcal groups B and C.

Meningococcal bacteria are naturally found in the back of the nose and throat in around 10 percent of people. The bacteria are usually harmless but in very rare cases can cause a serious infection if they get into the bloodstream.

Who is most at risk?
Meningococcal infection can occur in all age groups. It is more commonly seen in babies and children under the age of 5, and young adults between the ages of 15-25.

Meningococcal infection occurs most often in winter and early spring.

What are the signs and symptoms?
Symptoms begin to show 2-10 days after infection.

Most people will only experience a mild flu-like illness. A small number of people may continue to ‘carry’ meningococcal in their throat.

In rare cases, serious infection may lead to:
- fever
- severe headache
- drowsiness or confusion
- neck stiffness or joint pain
- sensitivity to light
- nausea and vomiting
- a rash (little red spots, or purplish/red blotches)

Severe meningococcal infection may cause inflammation of the coverings of the brain or spinal cord (meningitis), or infection of the blood (sepsis). These are medical emergencies.

How does meningococcal spread?
Meningococcal bacteria spread in small droplets from the nose and throat of people naturally carrying the bacteria, or from infected people in the early stages of illness.

Meningococcal bacteria don’t spread easily. Infection usually occurs after prolonged contact between people. You cannot get meningococcal from objects or the environment.

Once antibiotics have been started, you are no longer infectious after 24 hours.
How can we stop it spreading?
Vaccination against meningococcal C is part of the National Immunisation Program and given at 12 months of age.

Vaccines for other meningococcal groups are available for purchase on prescription.

What happens while I am in hospital?

**Isolation:** You may initially be cared for in a single room. Health care workers may wear a mask, gowns and gloves when entering your room and during your care. This is to reduce the risk of spreading the bacteria to other patients that they are caring for.

**Hand hygiene:** It is very important that staff, patients and visitors clean their hands every time they enter or leave a room or cubicle. To clean hands, alcohol based hand rub or soap and water can be used.

**It’s OK to ask:** Please feel free to remind your health care worker to clean their hands.

**Cleaning:** The frequency of cleaning and disinfection of your room/ward may increase with a focus on cleaning of surfaces that are frequently touched.

What do my visitors need to do?
Your visitors may initially need to wear a mask and eye protection for close contact with you (i.e. within 1 metre). Staff will show your visitors how to wear these.

Any questions?
If you would like further information about meningococcal infection, please contact the Alfred Health Infection Prevention & Healthcare Epidemiology Unit on 9076 3139

You can also find detailed fact sheets on the Better Health Channel website reference below.

**References**
www.nhmrc.gov.au
http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/organisms
http://www.vicniiss.org.au/Consumer

References

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