



HARFORD COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Facts about Meningitis

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether the meningitis is caused by a virus or bacteria is important because the severity of the illness and treatment differ.

Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe. For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

What are the signs of meningitis?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. In newborns and small infants, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect. The infant may appear lethargic or inactive, be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly.

How is meningitis diagnosed?

If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. Meningitis is usually diagnosed by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid. Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for the selection of correct antibiotics.

Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important that treatment be started early in the course of the disease in order to prevent brain damage or death.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria is spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e. coughing, kissing) and not through casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. However, people with meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* have spread the infection to others who have

had close or prolonged contact with the infected individual, even in the absence of known direct exchange of secretions.

Those that are considered to be a close contact to someone with meningitis may need to receive antibiotics to prevent infection (antibiotic prophylaxis). Close contacts are:

- People that live in the same house of a person that has meningitis
- People that have contact with mouth or nose secretions (kissing, sharing eating utensils, sharing cigarettes, or sharing drinks) of a person that has meningitis
- People that have done medical treatments, such as mouth to mouth resuscitation or intubation, on a person that has meningitis
- Children sharing toys with a person that has meningitis, such as in child care centers, family child care homes, or nursery schools.

Anyone not having direct contact with the infected person, but having contact with someone who had direct contact with the infected person, does not need antibiotic prophylaxis.

If you have questions, please call the Harford County Health Department at 410-612-1774.