Meningococcal disease

Meningococcal disease is a serious infection that can suddenly make you very sick. It is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* (meningococcal bacteria) and can lead to 2 very serious illnesses when the bacteria get into your body.

- Meningitis (an infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord).
- Septicaemia (blood infection).

Meningococcal disease can cause serious health problems. Some people may lose their hearing, have permanent disabilities, or even die from the disease. This is most likely to happen to babies, children under 5 years and young people aged 13 to 25 years. Getting help quickly is very important. Early treatment and close monitoring by a healthcare professional can save lives.

Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

The first symptoms of meningococcal disease may seem like the flu or a cold. However, the symptoms will usually get worse quickly with some people suddenly becoming very unwell, sometimes in just a few hours.

Common symptoms

Babies and children

- Fever (temperature over 38°C)
- Crying, unsettled, irritable
- Sleepy, floppy, hard to wake
- Refusing drinks or feeds
- Vomiting
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

Adults

- Fever (temperature over 38°C)
- Headache
- Nausea and vomiting
- Drowsiness, confusion
- Joint pains, aching muscles
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

Seeking health advice

If you or someone you know develops these symptoms or becomes suddenly unwell, **don't wait — please seek health advice immediately.** This is especially important if you or the person has recently been in close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease. It is important to let staff know this.

You can also call your GP, hauora or healthcare provider or call Healthline free on 0800 611 116, anytime 24/7 for advice as soon as possible. **In an emergency, call 111.**

How does meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal bacteria can live in the back of the nose and throat of healthy people. This is quite common — up to 1 in 3 people may carry it without getting sick. However, on rare occasions, meningococcal bacteria can enter the body and cause serious illness such as meningitis (an infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord) or septicaemia (blood infection). It is not known why this happens to some people and not others.

Meningococcal bacteria don't spread as easily from person-to-person as infections like measles or the flu. But being in close contact with someone who carries the bacteria — like living with them, intimate kissing and contact, or being repeatedly sneezed or coughed on — can increase your chance of getting sick. That's why people who live with someone who has meningococcal disease are at higher risk. Children and young adults who live closely together — such as in a boarding school or university hall of residence — are also at higher risk.

If someone becomes infected, it can take up to 10 days for symptoms to show.

There is minimal risk of catching the disease through sharing food, drink bottles, cigarettes or vapes, or through brief physical contact, such as a short hug or quick kiss on the lips or cheek.

Who is at risk of getting very sick with meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease can affect anyone of any age.

Some people are more likely to get very sick from meningococcal disease, including:

- babies
- children under 5 years
- teenagers and young adults aged 13 to 25 years
- people who have other respiratory infections like the flu
- people exposed to cigarette smoke and vaping
- people with a weak immune system (immunocompromised).

What happens if I get meningococcal disease?

If you develop meningococcal disease, you are likely to need to be treated in hospital for days or weeks to receive antibiotic treatment and monitoring by healthcare professionals. The antibiotics given to you will kill the meningococcal bacteria and help you to recover.

If left untreated, meningococcal disease can get worse very quickly and cause serious disability or even death. It is important to get help as soon as possible if you think you might have the disease.

What happens if I've been exposed to meningococcal disease?

Your local public health service team is notified of people with meningococcal disease and will contact you if you are a 'close' contact.

Close contact

You are considered a 'close contact' if you've had prolonged, very close, or intimate contact with someone who has meningococcal disease (e.g. you live together).

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HE2965 - This resource is available from healthed.govt.nz or your local Authorised Provider.

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Even though your risk of getting meningococcal disease is low, meningococcal disease is very serious. That's why it's important to take steps to protect yourself and others.

Your public health service team will give you all the information you need, including more detail about the following.

- Taking the free antibiotics provided – the medication will help stop the meningococcal bacteria spreading.

- Getting the free vaccinations provided – the vaccines will help protect you from some strains of meningococcal bacteria.

- Watching out for the symptoms of meningococcal disease and seeking health advice urgently if you become unwell.

- Continuing with your usual activities unless you develop symptoms.

Low-risk contact

If you haven't had prolonged, very close, or intimate contact with someone who has meningococcal disease (e.g. you visited the person's house or you went to the same school or workplace), your risk of getting meningococcal disease is no higher than anyone else in the general population.

Even so, because meningococcal disease is very serious, it's important to do the following.

- Know the symptoms of meningococcal disease and seek health advice quickly if you become unwell.

- Watch out for symptoms even if you've been vaccinated – the vaccines don't protect you against all strains of the meningococcal bacteria.

- Continue with your usual activities unless you develop symptoms.

- Get vaccinated if it's recommended for you – read the prevention section of this information sheet and visit info.health.nz/meningococcalvaccine.

Contact type and what it means:

Close contact	Low-risk contact
Prolonged, very close or intimate contact (e.g. living together)	Not prolonged, very close or intimate contact (e.g. visiting someone's house, going to same school or workplace)
What you should do:	**What you should do:**
• Take free antibiotics • Get vaccinated • Watch for symptoms • Continue your usual activities	• Know and watch for symptoms • Continue your usual activities • Get vaccinated if recommended for you

⚠ Prevention

You can reduce your risk of getting and passing on meningococcal disease by doing the following.

- **Get vaccinated – it's free for many people including all children under 5 years and young people aged 13 to 25 years in their first year of close-living situations (including up to 3 months before).** There are different vaccines to protect against different types of meningococcal bacteria. For more information about meningococcal vaccines and who can get them visit info.health.nz/meningococcalvaccine.

- **Practice good hygiene** — cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough, wash and dry your hands thoroughly, or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

- **Keep your home smoke and vape free.**

ⓘ For more information:

- Visit the Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora website info.health.nz/meningococcal and info.health.nz/meningococcalvaccine.

- Free NZ Relay Services are available at nzrelay.co.nz if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have speech communication difficulties.

- Call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information. You can choose to speak with a Māori clinician if you are calling between 8am and 8pm. Interpreter services and NZ Relay support are also available.

- Call the free Vaccination Helpline on 0800 282 926. Support is available Monday to Friday, between 8.30am and 5.00pm, You can choose to speak with a Māori or Pacific advisor, or a disability advisor. Interpreter services and NZ Relay support are also available.

- For people living or visiting rurally, you can contact a doctor after usual business hours by calling Ka Ora Telecare for free on **0800 2 KA ORA (0800 252 672)** or by visiting kaora.co.nz.

- A dedicated helpline for Disability support is available Monday to Friday, between 8.00am and 5.00pm. Call free on **0800 11 12 13** or text **8988** for help and information or visit healthpoint.co.nz/disability-helpline.

Health New Zealand
Te Whatu Ora