

What is meningitis?

- Meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges (lining) of the brain and spinal cord.
- Meningitis can be caused by a variety of viruses and bacteria.
- The cause of most meningitis cases is viral.
- Bacterial meningitis is most often caused by pneumococcus, meningococcus, Group B streptococcus, or E. coli.
- A sample of spinal fluid is taken to determine the organism.

How does a person get meningitis?

- Viruses that can cause meningitis can be spread by exchange of infected body fluids such as respiratory or throat secretions, or infected fecal material. There is a small risk associated with the bite of some insects, such as ticks and mosquitoes.
- Bacteria that can cause meningitis are spread to other people through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (coughing and kissing).
- Fortunately, none of the bacteria or viruses that cause meningitis are as contagious as illnesses like the common cold.
- The infection is most often spread between people who are in close contact, such as those who live together. Sharing food, drinking glasses, eating utensils, tissues, or towels may also spread the infection.

- Meningitis is not spread by casual contact (at school or work) or by sharing the same air space with a person who has meningitis.

What are the symptoms?

- The symptoms of meningitis are very similar, regardless of cause:
 - fever
 - stiff neck
 - drowsiness, confusion, and/or severe headache
 - eyes sensitive to bright light
 - nausea and vomiting.
- In children less than one year of age, symptoms may be more difficult to identify. They may include:
 - fever
 - irritability
 - difficult to waken
 - vomiting
 - progression to a stiff neck and bulging fontanel.
- The symptoms may vary from one person to another.
- ***Viral meningitis***
 - Is serious but rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems.
 - Symptoms usually last from 7 to 10 days. Most people recover completely.
- ***Bacterial meningitis***
 - Can be very serious and result in disability or death, if not treated promptly. Has a rapid onset and progression of symptoms.

How is meningitis treated?

- Any meningitis is serious and needs medical attention. If you have symptoms and have been in contact with someone who has been diagnosed with meningitis, call your doctor.
- ***Viral***
 - in some cases, antiviral medication is used to treat viral meningitis. Antibiotics will not prevent sickness if a virus caused the meningitis.
- ***Bacterial***
 - Public Health will be notified of bacterial meningitis and will implement preventive measures, if necessary, for contacts of cases.
 - Persons who have had intimate or direct exposure to a person with bacterial meningitis are at a higher risk for contracting the infection, and therefore may be offered antibiotics or vaccine to protect them.
 - It is important to treat cases of bacterial meningitis quickly. If a person is diagnosed with (or strongly suspected to have) bacterial meningitis, the doctor will start intravenous antibiotics as soon as possible, often before the causative organism is identified.
 - Once the organism is identified through laboratory tests, the antibiotics can be changed if necessary, or discontinued if the organism is viral.

How is Meningitis Prevented?

- Maintain age appropriate routine immunizations against *Haemophilus influenzae type b*, measles, mumps, rubella, polio, chickenpox, meningococcal, and pneumococcal infections.
- Wash hands before meals, after going to the bathroom, and after having hand contact with respiratory secretions.
- Do not share food, drinking glasses, water bottles, eating utensils, or lip gloss.
- Protect yourself against mosquito and tick bites.

For specific types of bacterial meningitis, those contacts who may be at risk will be assessed in a timely manner for any required follow-up.

For more information contact Population and Public Health at **306-655-4612**.
