

Georgia Department of Human Resources

**MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE IN
GEORGIA**

- Meningococcal disease is a serious infection caused by bacteria. It can lead to brain damage, loss of fingers, toes or other body parts and death.
- Meningococcal bacteria can cause **meningitis**, an infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord, or **sepsis**, an infection of the blood and all parts of the body.
- Symptoms of meningitis include fever, stiff neck, headache, sensitivity to light, sleepiness, confusion and seizures. Symptoms of meningococcal sepsis include fever, weakness and a rash that appears as reddish-purple spots.
- Meningococcal disease is most common in infants and in people with certain medical conditions. Risk of disease also increases during adolescence, peaking around age 18. College freshmen living in dormitories are also at higher risk.
- It can be treated with antibiotics, but treatment must be started early. Despite treatment, 10-15% of people who get the disease die from it. Another 10-20% suffer long-term consequences.

Two kinds of meningococcal vaccine are available; meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV, Menactra™) and meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPV, Menomune™). Both vaccines protect against four strains of meningococcal bacteria, including two of the three main types found in the U.S. Vaccination is recommended for persons with elevated risk of disease, including those entering the teenage years.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria. The two most common forms of meningococcal disease are *meningitis* (a bacterial infection of the fluid and covering of the spinal cord and brain) and *sepsis* (an infection of the bloodstream). Meningitis has other causes as well, the most common being viral infection.

How common is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is rare. In the United States, each year there are about 2,100 cases (0.5-1 cases for every 100,000 people).

How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis is commonly made by growing the bacteria from the spinal fluid or blood.

How are meningococcal bacteria spread?

The bacteria are transmitted during close contact (such as kissing) from person-to-person in secretions from the nose and throat. They are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near an infected person. The bacteria can live outside the body for only a few minutes; so if the germs contaminate a desk or book, they soon die. As many as 1 in 10 people carry the bacteria in the back of the nose and throat at any given time, especially in winter. It is not yet understood why only a very small

number of those who have the bacteria in their nose and throat develop disease while others remain healthy.

How can I avoid getting meningococcal disease?

You can protect yourself by maintaining good health and hygiene. As a general recommendation, you should wash your hands frequently. Avoid sharing materials that make mouth contact, such as eating utensils, bottles, cigarettes or lip balm. All persons should avoid smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke, which are risk factors for meningococcal disease. Contact a healthcare provider immediately if you are in close contact with someone who is known or suspected to have meningococcal infection.

Who should be vaccinated against meningococcal disease?

All persons aged 11-18 years should be vaccinated with 1 dose of meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV) at the earliest opportunity.

No meningococcal vaccine is available for children younger than 2 years of age, who are at highest risk for meningococcal disease; however, persons aged 2-55 years who are at increased risk for meningococcal disease (see below) should be vaccinated. For these persons, MCV is preferred to meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPV) unless elevated risk will be short-term (3-5 years).

Persons at increased risk for meningococcal disease who should be vaccinated include:

- college freshmen living in dormitories
- microbiologists routinely exposed to isolates of *Neisseria meningitidis*
- military recruits
- travelers to or residents of countries in which *N. meningitidis* meningitis is hyperendemic or epidemic
- persons with terminal complement component deficiencies
- persons with anatomic or functional asplenia

Where can I get more information?

For more information about meningococcal disease in Georgia, contact the Division of Public Health at (404) 657-2700

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