

# DISPATCH



## MENINGITIS

### What Is It?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord. It has many causes but the most important infectious ones are caused by bacteria and viruses. The bacteria, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis*, are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis. *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) was the main cause of bacterial meningitis in the past but children are now vaccinated for it.

### How can you get it?

Meningitis spreads from person-to-person through respiratory droplets from coughing and sneezing. Procedures such as suctioning can also cause droplet spread. Droplets can be travel through the air approximately 3 feet. Patients with meningitis are most likely to spread the infection at the time they are diagnosed.

### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually begin 3-7 days after exposure to bacteria and include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck

Other symptoms may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Photophobia (sensitivity to light)
- Altered mental status such as decreased awareness and/or confusion

**Complications** are generally from bacterial meningitis and include sepsis (infection in the blood stream) particularly from *Neisseria meningitidis*. This is a very serious infection and can cause death. Infants less than one month of age are at highest risk for severe infection.

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## How do you prevent it?

Meningitis is prevented through vaccination. There are vaccines for three bacteria that can cause meningitis: *Neisseria meningitidis*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Haemophilus*

*influenzae* type b (Hib). However, pre-placement vaccinations are only recommended for microbiologists working with *Neisseria meningitidis* and are not routinely recommended for healthcare personnel.

You can help prevent the spread of meningitis by:

- Preventing contamination and performing decontamination of surfaces
- Using Universal Precautions
  - Assume patients with respiratory symptoms are contagious and provide masks for symptomatic patients
  - Limit the number of crew members having direct patient contact
  - Hand hygiene (wash with soap and water or using an alcohol based hand rub)
  - Personal protective equipment (PPE) (gloves, gowns, and respiratory protection). **IAFF recommends P100 respirators** for all patients with respiratory symptoms such as cough

## What should you do if you believe you have been exposed?

Antibiotics are given to close contacts of patients with meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*. “Close contacts include household members, child care center contacts, and anyone directly exposed to the patient’s oral secretions (e.g., through kissing, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, endotracheal intubation, or endotracheal tube management).” Antibiotics should start as soon as possible after exposure, within 24 hours if possible.

## For More Information and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), Check Out:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):  
<http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html>
  - CDC, Meningococcal Vaccination: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/mening/default.htm>
  - CDC, Epidemiology and Prevention of Meningococcal Disease: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/mening.html>
- Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC): <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/vpd-mev/meningococcal-eng.php>