

# Meningococcal Disease

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## What is it?

**Meningococcal** [muh-ning-goh-KOK-uhl] disease is a very serious illness caused by a type of bacteria (germ) called **Neisseria meningitidis**. These bacteria are normally found in the nose and throat in about 1 in 4 people. The lining of the throat guards against these germs getting into the bloodstream. In some cases, the bacteria break through this lining and quickly multiply.

When these bacteria get into the bloodstream, they cause severe infections:

- **Meningitis** [men-in-JAHY-tis] — An inflammation of the tissue around the brain and spinal cord
- **Sepsis** — A life-threatening bloodstream infection

As many as 3 in 10 people with meningococcal disease may suffer severe complications. The disease can result in death if not treated quickly.

## What are the symptoms?

Meningococcal disease typically begins with flu-like symptoms—sudden headache, fever, chills—as well as neck stiffness. Symptoms might also include nausea, vomiting, being more sensitive to light, rash, and confusion. Symptoms can progress to coma in just a few hours and be fatal if not treated quickly.

## How is it spread?

These bacteria are spread from person to person through contact that exchanges bodily fluids (by kissing, sharing food and drink, using the same utensils) near the time that someone becomes ill with the disease. You won't get the disease by touching items the infected person has touched since the bacteria cannot live outside the human body.

## Who is most at risk?

The disease may occur any time but is more common from late winter to early spring. Meningococcal disease can occur in anyone, but those most at risk are people who:

- Are infants ages 6 to 12 months, teenagers, or young adults
- Live in close quarters (such as in college dorms or military settings)
- Have certain medical conditions (such as not having a spleen)
- Travel to areas where meningococcal disease is common

## How is it diagnosed and treated?

If you or someone you know has symptoms or could have been exposed to meningococcal disease, it is critical to see a doctor immediately. Your doctor will test your blood, spinal fluid, and other fluids for the bacteria. If found, treatment involves taking antibiotics available by mouth and by IV, likely in the hospital.

If you are hospitalized, you will be in a private isolation room, which means that:

- The hospital room door will remain closed at all times with a sign on it about isolation precautions.
- Anyone entering the room will need to wear a surgical mask, and you will need to wear a mask anytime you leave the room.
- Healthcare providers will also wear gloves, a mask, and perhaps a gown as well as protective goggles when they care for you.

## How can I prevent it?

For those most at risk, the best way to keep from getting meningococcal disease is to be vaccinated. Talk to your doctor or health department about the meningococcal vaccine. Be sure to tell your doctor if you think you might be pregnant, are planning to become pregnant very soon, or breastfeeding.

Both good handwashing practices (see illustration at right) and not sharing food or utensils are vital to keeping from getting the disease.

If you have been exposed to meningococcal disease, you may be given an antibiotic called **rifampin** [ri-FAM-pin] that can prevent the disease. This is not a treatment if you are already ill. Be aware that rifampin can:

- Cause problems during pregnancy
- Turn body secretions (such as urine and tears) orange (a normal side effect)
- Leave permanent red stains on your contacts
- Decrease the effectiveness of oral birth control medicines (contraceptives)



### Questions for my doctor

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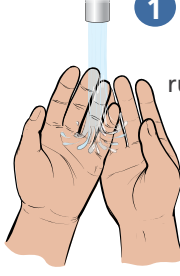
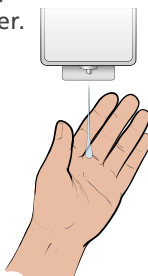


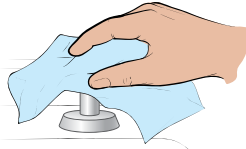
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## Hand washing with soap and water

-  **1** Wet hands with warm, running water.
-  **2** Apply liquid soap or use a clean bar of soap. Lather well.
-  **3** Rub your hands together vigorously for at least 15 to 20 seconds. Be sure to scrub all surfaces of your hands and fingers.
-  **4** Rinse well. Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.
-  **5** Use a towel to turn off the faucet.

## Hand washing with a hand sanitizer

-  **1** Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Apply it to the palm of your hand. Read the label to see how much to apply.
-  **2** Be sure to cover all surfaces of your hands and fingers. Rub your hands together until they are dry.

Good handwashing can help prevent the spread of disease. Healthcare providers can spread the germs if they don't wash their hands often enough. If you don't see your healthcare providers clean their hands, please ask them to do so.

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