

## PROTECTING ONTARIANS AGAINST MENINGITIS

Meningococcal meningitis is a serious infection of the fluid and lining that covers the spinal cord caused by a strain of bacteria, *Neisseria meningitidis*.

### **Meningitis Strikes And Spreads Quickly**

The onset of this deadly disease is usually sudden (sometimes after just several hours) and characterized by a high fever, rash, severe headache and stiff neck. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion and sleepiness. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If any of these symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately.

Meningococcal meningitis is contagious with the bacteria being spread through droplets in the air from coughing or sneezing. Bacteria from the saliva of an infected person can also be spread by kissing or by sharing common items (such as drinks, toothbrushes, lipstick, cigarettes).

Meningococcal meningitis has a high death rate among affected individuals and can lead to serious complications such as brain damage, deafness and blindness.

In Ontario, there have been 22 reported cases of meningococcal meningitis caused by serogroup C during the last three years, which resulted in eight deaths.

### **Vaccination Is The Best Protection**

The best protection against meningococcal meningitis is to receive the Meningococcal C-Conjugate vaccine. A study in Great Britain showed the effectiveness of this vaccine in children aged one to 17 ranged from 87 to 100 per cent. Following a large-scale immunization program, the number of deaths due to meningitis in people under 20 years of age fell by 91 per cent.

### **McGuinty Government Makes Vaccine Available**

On September 1, 2004, the McGuinty government made the Meningococcal C-Conjugate vaccine available for free to one-year-old children born on or after September 1, 2003. As of January 1, 2005, the program was further expanded to include children 12 years of age, youth aged 15 to 19 years inclusive, and high-risk people of all ages. Since then, over 180,000 pre-teens (12-year-olds) and teenagers (15- to-19-year-olds) have received the vaccine.

### **Advertising Campaign**

The government is currently running a print advertising campaign to inform parents of children and youth about the threat of meningococcal meningitis and the availability of the free meningococcal C-conjugate vaccine for the age groups listed above. The print ad focuses on parents of 15-to-19-year-olds. These ads are running to coincide with community and school-based clinics being held by local public health units through to the end of the school year. The government is also running a series of youth focussed Internet banner ads on popular sites like Yahoo and MSN Messenger.