

Meningococcal Fact Sheet for Parents and Students

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacteria known as *Neisseria meningitidis* (commonly known as meningococcus). Many people (10% of the population) carry the bacteria at the back of their throat or nose without feeling sick. In rare instances, the bacteria overcome the body's natural defenses and cause serious diseases, including meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain) and septicemia (widespread infection involving the blood and multiple organs). Meningococcal disease is fatal in

8-15% of cases.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The symptoms of meningococcal disease can vary widely, but include sudden onset of high fever, severe headache, vomiting, stiff neck and a rash. Sensitivity to light, sleepiness, confusion and, in severe cases, coma may also occur.

What are the complications of meningococcal disease?

The consequences of meningococcal meningitis can be severe. Approximately 1 in 10 patients will die, and 11 to 19% of survivors will suffer some form of permanent disability, such as hearing loss, neurological damage or limb loss.

How is the disease spread?

The meningococcus bacteria are spread by direct contact with respiratory and oral

secretions (saliva, and/or nasal mucus) or, in other words, "swapping spit" with an infected person.

To prevent the spread of meningococcal disease, objects that have come in contact with another person's mouth should not be shared. Furthermore, good hand hygiene and the use of sleeves, the shoulder, or tissues to cover coughs or sneezes is important to remember.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

There are a number of vaccines which protect against some of the various serogroups (strains) that cause meningococcal disease.

Since 2005 routine immunization against meningococcal (serogroup C) disease was recommended and publicly funded for children one year of age. Students in grade 7 and 15-19 year olds were offered the vaccine as a 'catch-up' program.

Emerging studies have shown that a routine dose of meningococcal vaccine is now necessary for adolescents. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is offering a vaccine that provides protection against serogroup C, and also provides protection against 3 additional strains that cause meningococcal disease. The vaccine is provincially funded for students attending grade 7 in Ontario and will be offered at school-based immunization clinics.

Who should NOT receive this vaccine?

Individuals who:

- are allergic to the vaccine or any of its components.
- have previously had a neurological condition called Guillian-Barré Syndrome.
- are allergic to latex should consult with their health care provider before receiving this vaccine.
- have been vaccinated within the last 6 months with another *Neisseria meningitides* polysaccharide vaccine
- have been vaccinated within the last 1 month with another *Neisseria meningitides* conjugate vaccine.

-are on high dose corticosteroids or immunosuppressive agents, or who have immunosuppressive illness should delay vaccination until condition/treatment has resolved wherever possible.

-are pregnant or breastfeeding should consult with their health care practitioner.

How do I ensure that my child receives this vaccine at school?

Ensure you read and understand the information that will be provided to you by your local public health department. Sign and ensure the consent form is returned to your child's school before the scheduled clinic date.

Contact your local public health unit for additional information.