



Office of the Chief Public Health Officer Frequently Asked Questions – Bacterial Meningitis

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a condition that can cause a fever, headache, and stiff neck. It happens when the lining that covers the brain and spinal cord (called the "meninges") gets inflamed (swollen) or infected. There are many causes of meningitis, including bacteria or viruses.

What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

Symptoms of bacterial meningitis usually come on suddenly, so people can get very sick over a short period of time. Common symptoms include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck – This happens most often in adults and children. Babies might not get a stiff neck.
- Nausea or vomiting
- Acting confused, or being hard to wake up
- Having light bother a person's eyes
- A rash that looks like red or purple spots on the skin
- Seizures – Seizures are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. They can make people pass out, or move (convulse or jerk uncontrollably) or behave strangely.

Babies can also have other symptoms, including:

- Being more sleepy or fussy than usual
- Not feeding well

Should I see the doctor or nurse?

Yes. A person with symptoms concerning for meningitis should see a doctor or nurse right away.

How common is bacterial meningitis?

Although viral meningitis is quite common, bacterial meningitis is quite rare.



Why are we so worried about bacterial meningitis?

People can recover from bacterial meningitis, but sometimes it can severely impact a person's health or even cause death.

Can bacterial meningitis spread from person to person?

The majority of people with bacterial meningitis do not get it from another person – it just happens sporadically. **Person-to-person transmission of meningitis is rare.** The highest risk of person-to-person spread occurs within households, or in people who share a bed with a person with bacterial meningitis.

Bacterial meningitis is not spread through the air. The risk of spreading in a pre-school setting is low, and the risk of spread in school-aged children is very low.

Can bacterial meningitis be prevented?

Yes. Certain vaccines can help prevent bacterial meningitis. The routine NWT immunization schedule includes vaccines against the following organisms which can cause bacterial meningitis:

- Meningococcus
- Pneumococcus
- Haemophilus influenzae type b, called "Hib" (for babies and young children)

Make sure your child is up-to-date on all of their immunizations to protect them from bacterial meningitis.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your local health centre, public health unit or doctor's clinic.

More information is available online from the Public Health Agency of Canada:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/vaccine-preventable-diseases/invasive-meningococcal-disease.html>