

# Bacterial Meningitis

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## What is bacterial meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis is swelling of the membranes around the spinal cord or brain caused by bacteria. Many kinds of bacteria may cause meningitis. The most common are: *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (Pneumococcus), *Neisseria meningitidis* (Meningococcus), and *Haemophilus influenzae* type B (Hib). Bacterial meningitis is a relatively rare disease and usually occurs in a single isolated event, however outbreaks can occur.

## Who can get bacterial meningitis?

Anyone can get bacterial meningitis. However risk of infection is highest in:

- People in the same household, daycare center, or who have had close personal contact with someone who has bacterial meningitis
- Pre-teens and adolescents
- Infants
- College freshmen living in dormitories
- People who travel outside of the United States to areas where bacterial meningitis is more common such as sub-Saharan Africa
- Adults weakened by illness, medicine, or old age can also become ill from these infections.

## What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

Symptoms can develop over several hours or over several days after exposure to the bacteria to appear. Typically, symptoms develop within 3 – 7 days after exposure.

Symptoms in anyone over the age of 2 years include fever, severe headache, vomiting and nausea, stiff neck and back, sensitivity to light, confusion, extreme weakness, seizure, and coma. In anyone under the age of 2 years, the classic symptoms of fever, headache and neck stiffness may be absent or hard to detect. Infants infected can appear slow or inactive, be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly.

## How is bacterial meningitis spread?

Bacterial meningitis is spread by direct contact with the nose or throat discharge of an infected person. This includes kissing, sharing utensils or drinking glasses, coughing, or sneezing.

A person may spread the bacteria from the time they are first infected until the bacteria are no longer present in discharges from the throat or nose. The length of time that a person is communicable varies according to the treatment used.

Some people carry the bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness, but they can still spread the bacteria to others.

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## **How common is bacterial meningitis?**

Bacterial meningitis is relatively rare in the United States. Clusters of more than a few cases are very uncommon.

## **What is the treatment for bacterial meningitis?**

It is important to see a doctor right away for prompt diagnosis and treatment. Bacterial meningitis is treated using antibiotics. Sometimes doctors will recommend that close contacts (household members, day care center contacts, etc.) be given preventive treatment in order to reduce the chance that they will develop the illness.

## **Are there complications from bacterial meningitis?**

It is important to continue to see your doctor on a regular basis after being diagnosed. Some possible complications include hearing, vision, and speech problems, muscle weakness, seizures, and learning delays (both physical and mental). Up to 25% of patients who recover may have chronic damage to the nervous system. Bacterial meningitis is fatal 10% to 14% of the time.

## **How can bacterial meningitis be prevented?**

The most important thing to prevent the spread of bacterial meningitis is handwashing. Everyone should wash their hands after touching any nose or throat fluid, before eating, or when hands are soiled in order to decrease the chance of spreading the germs.

Antibiotics can be given to household contacts that have been exposed to Hib or Meningococcus. Nothing is given for Pneumococcus.

There are vaccines against Hib and Pneumococcus that are given as part of routine baby and toddler shots that help to protect against the bacteria.

There is a meningitis vaccine available for children over age 11. This vaccination is recommended as part of the routine checkup at age 11 or 12. A booster dose is recommended at age 16. The meningitis vaccine can be given to people ages 2 to 54 with certain medical conditions that affect the immune system.

## **How do I get more information on bacterial meningitis?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department  
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Website: <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/bacterial.html>  
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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