

# Bacterial Meningitis FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation  
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
(202) 442-9371 Fax (202) 442-8060  
[www.doh.dc.gov](http://www.doh.dc.gov)

## What is Bacterial Meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) that can be caused by several types of bacteria. It is important to know which bacterium is causing the meningitis so that the appropriate antibiotic can be given. A common type of bacterial meningitis is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as meningococcal meningitis.

## Who gets bacterial meningitis?

Anyone can get bacterial meningitis, but children and young adults are more often affected. Bacterial meningitis is more common in the late winter to early spring.

## Which bacteria cause this form of meningitis?

Any bacterium is capable of causing bacterial meningitis. The most common cause is *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. The less common causes of bacterial meningitis, staphylococci, enteric bacteria, group B streptococci, and *Listeria*, occur in persons with specific susceptibilities or as a consequence of head trauma. The occurrence of *Haemophilus influenzae* meningitis has decreased since the development of the *Haemophilus influenzae* vaccine.

## What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

The symptoms of bacterial meningitis are high fever, headache, and stiff neck in anyone over the age of 2 years. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking at bright lights, confusion or sleepiness. Some individuals develop a rash. The classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect in newborns and small infants. The infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, people of any age may develop seizures.

## How is bacterial meningitis spread?

Bacterial meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Haemophilus influenzae* is spread by the respiratory fluids from the infected person when they cough or sneeze. It can also be spread by direct contact with the secretions from the nose and throat of the infected person. Transmission usually occurs only after **very** close contact for a period of time with the infected person such as

living in the same house, college dorm, or military barracks. Other types of bacterial meningitis are not spread from person to person.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear from 2 to 10 days after being exposed.

## Is a person with bacterial meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious, such as, *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Haemophilus influenzae*. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory secretions such as coughing, kissing, sharing a cigarette, drink or a toothbrush and by being in close contact for a period of time. Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

## How is bacterial meningitis treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. Due to the seriousness of the infection, the patient is usually hospitalized and the treatment needs to be started as early as possible. The antibiotic is generally given through intravenous fluid (IV).

## Should a person with bacterial meningitis be isolated?

Yes, a person with bacterial is placed in isolation. The person needs to be isolated for at least 24 hours after appropriate antibiotics have been given. Anyone visiting the person needs to wear a mask to enter the room for as long as the person is isolated.

## Is there a vaccine for bacterial meningitis?

Yes, there are vaccines against *Haemophilus influenzae* serotype b, *Neisseria meningitidis*, and *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

## Want more information?

Information about bacterial meningitis and other related health topics can be found at the website [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-9143.

