

Bacterial Meningitis

Illness requiring droplet precautions

This handout describes bacterial meningitis and its symptoms. It also explains how this disease can be spread and offers steps to prevent others from getting it.

What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. It can be caused by a *virus* or *bacteria*.

In bacterial meningitis, different types of bacteria can cause the disease. Antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people.

Before the 1990s, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) was the main cause of bacterial meningitis.

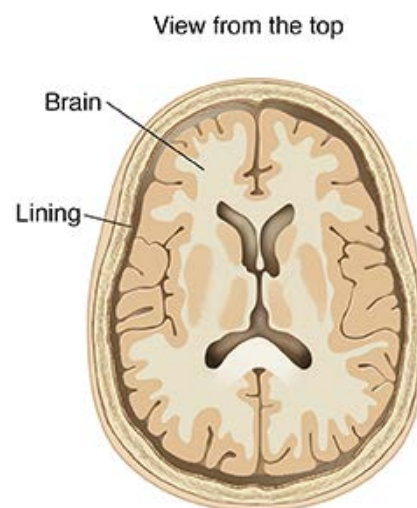
But, because all children now receive Hib vaccines as part of their routine immunizations, this virus is no longer as big a problem. Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

Doctors must tell the health department when a patient is diagnosed with meningitis so that antibiotics can be given to their close contacts. This includes people in the same household or daycare center, or anyone with direct contact with the patient's saliva, such as a boyfriend or girlfriend.

What are the symptoms?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over 2 years old. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness.

In newborns and small infants, fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or hard to detect. The infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.



Meningitis affects the fluid that surrounds the brain.



To Learn More

To learn more about bacterial meningitis, visit www.cdc.gov/meningitis/bacterial.html

What are the risks of bacterial meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis may cause brain damage, hearing loss, or learning problems. Viral meningitis is often less severe and does not need treatment.

How is it spread?

Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread when someone who is infected coughs or sneezes, or when they kiss another person. Meningitis is not as contagious as the cold or the flu. It is not spread by casual contact or by breathing the air where an infected person has been.

To protect others, people with symptoms should:

- Wear a mask
- Wash their hands often
- Throw tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a healthcare facility

UWMC has “Stop Germs Here” kiosks with masks, tissues, and hand gel at the Information Desk and at intake areas. Tell your healthcare provider if you think you have meningitis or that you have been exposed to meningitis.

How is it diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment with an antibiotic are very important. Most times, diagnosis is made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid. To take this sample, your doctor will insert a needle into your lower back.

How are others protected from meningitis?

At UW Medical Center, we place a “Droplet Precautions” sign near the door of your room. This tells healthcare workers and your visitors to follow certain precautions when caring for you.

If you are in droplet precautions:

- Hospital staff and visitors will wear masks, eye protection, gowns, and gloves when they enter your room.
- **We advise hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness.**
- We will ask you to stay in your room unless you need to go to other areas of the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, we will ask you to wash your hands and wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.
- Please do **not** use the nutrition rooms. When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your care team to bring it to you.

When can droplet precautions be stopped?

We will keep you in droplet precautions for meningitis until we know which type of bacteria is causing the disease and you have been receiving the correct antibiotic for at least 24 hours.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Infection Prevention:
206.598.6122