Bacterial Meningitis
An illness requiring droplet precautions

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 viral or bacterial infection. For bacterial meningitis, it is important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis, because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Before the 1990s, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis, but new vaccines being given to all children as part of their routine immunizations have reduced the occurrence of invasive disease due to *H. influenzae*.

Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

The health department is notified when a patient is diagnosed with meningococcal meningitis so that antibiotics can be given to protect close contacts (people in the same household or day-care center, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) of a person diagnosed with *Neisseria meningitidis* meningitis.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?
High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. 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, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect, and 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.

What are the complications of meningitis?
Bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. *Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without treatment.*
Questions?
Call 206-598-6122

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff is also available to help at any time.

Healthcare Epidemiology and Infection Control: 206-598-6122

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How is bacterial meningitis spread?
Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (such as coughing or kissing). 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.

To protect others, persons with symptoms should practice “respiratory hygiene” by wearing a mask, washing their hands often, and disposing of tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a healthcare facility. Free “Cover Your Cough Kits” are available at the Information Desk and at clinic intake areas.

Please tell your healthcare provider if you think you have meningitis or think that you have been exposed to meningitis.

How is it diagnosed?
Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid, which is obtained by inserting a needle into an area in the lower back. Identification of the type of bacteria causing meningitis tells us which antibiotic to select for treatment.

How are others protected from meningitis?
At University of Washington Medical Center, we place a “Droplet Precautions” sign near the doorway of your room to alert healthcare workers, caregivers, and your visitors to observe expanded precautions when visiting or caring for you to protect them from “catching” the disease.

What does it mean to be in droplet precautions?
Healthcare workers, caregivers, and visitors wear masks, eye protection, gowns, and gloves when providing care.

Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness are emphasized.

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.

Please do not use the nutrition rooms while you are “in isolation.” When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your healthcare team to bring it to you.

When can the precautions be stopped?
Droplet precautions for meningitis may be stopped after the organism causing the meningitis has been identified and it is confirmed that you have been receiving an effective antibiotic for at least 24 hours.