WHAT IS MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE?

Meningococcal disease is a serious life threatening illness that causes meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the spinal cord and brain) and /or septicaemia (blood poisoning). The disease can also cause septic arthritis (joint infection) pneumonia (lung infection) and conjunctivitis (infection of the eye and eyelid).

People with meningococcal disease can become extremely unwell very quickly. Five to ten per cent of patients with meningococcal disease die, even despite treatment. However the disease has become less common in recent years with less than 100 cases seen each year. Winter and spring are the peak seasons for meningococcal disease.

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with meningococcus bacteria of which there are several types. Between 5 and 25 per cent of people carry meningococcal bacteria at the back of the nose and throat without showing any illness or symptoms.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms may include sudden onset of fever, headache, neck stiffness, joint pain, a rash of red-purple spots or bruises, dislike of bright lights, nausea and vomiting. Not all symptoms may be present at once. Symptoms in young Children may be less specific. These may include irritability, difficulty waking, high pitched crying and refusal to eat.

The typical meningococcal rash doesn’t disappear with gentle pressure on the skin. Not all people with meningococcal disease get a rash or the rash may appear late in the disease. Sometimes the classic symptoms may follow less specific symptoms including leg pain, cold hands and abnormal skin colour.

Meningococcal disease can follow on from other respiratory infections. People who have symptoms of meningococcal disease should seek urgent medical attention, especially if there is persistent fever, irritability, drowsiness or lethargy, or if a child is not feeding normally.

WHO IS AT RISK FROM MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE?

While the disease can affect anyone, those at highest risk include:

- Household contacts
- Infants, small children, adolescents and young adults.
- People who are exposed to cigarette smoke and people exposed to smokers
- People who practice intimate (deep mouth) kissing with more than one partner
- People who have had recent upper viral respiratory tract illness
- Travellers to countries with high rates of meningococcal disease
- People with no working spleen or have other rare medical conditions

People who have minor exposure to someone with meningococcal disease have a very low risk of developing the disease.

HOW CAN PNEUMOCOCCAL MENINGITIS BE SPREAD?

Meningococcal bacteria are not easily spread from one person to another; the bacteria do not live long outside the human body. The bacteria are spread via contact with respiratory secretions from the nose or throat. This generally requires close prolonged contact with the person carrying the bacteria that are usually well, for example, living in the same household or intimate (deep) kissing. Meningococcal bacteria are not easily spread by sharing drinks, food or cigarettes

HOW WILL MY CARE CHANGE WHILST IN HOSPITAL?

You will initially be cared for using special infection control measures as outlined below:
• A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.

• During the infectious period hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves, a mask, goggles and an apron or gown when they enter your room. Your visitors will also be asked to wear these items.

• You will be allocated a private room with your own en suite facilities. Your movement throughout the hospital will be limited to essential movement only and you will be required to put on a mask prior to leaving the room. Once the cause of your meningitis is identified as pneumococcal (up to 24 hours) these precautions will be ceased.

GOOD HAND HYGIENE PRACTICES

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent ALL infections. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day.

Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection prevention and control team.

During your stay in hospital you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled / dirty. There are a variety of brands on the market and are available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

CAN I STILL HAVE VISITORS?

Yes. However while waiting for the cause of your meningitis to be identified (up to 24 hours) we recommend that you restrict the number of visitors you have to as few as possible. People that should not visit you include children, pregnant women and immunocompromised people. Initially your visitors may be asked to wear protective equipment such as gloves, mask, goggles and an apron or gown. The nursing staff will assist your visitors with this as well as instruct your visitors on the importance of strict hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to do this. They can use either; soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol hand rub provided outside your room.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I GO HOME?

• When you return home it is important for you, your family and your friends to continue the good hand hygiene practices that you have been taught in hospital every day.

• You should always maintain good respiratory hygiene practices to prevent the spread of any respiratory infection. Always cover your nose and mouth to sneeze and cough and dispose of used tissues immediately in the rubbish. After sneezing, blowing your nose or coughing wash your hands.

WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER INFORMATION?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our extension numbers are; 9433 or 9732

Or

NSW Department of Health www.health.nsw.gov.au

REFERENCES


Editor: Jayne O’Connor. August 2013. Infection Prevention & Control department, Adventist healthcare Ltd.

This information leaflet provides basic information only and is to be as a guide, not as a complete resource on the subject.