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Meningococcal Disease (Meningitis & Blood Infection) **Fact Sheet**

Meningococcal Disease (Meningitis & Blood Infection)

There have been 9 cases of confirmed meningococcal disease over the past 3 months in people who live in Brooklyn. This is an increase in the number of cases typically seen during this time period. Meningococcal disease is transmitted through close contact with an infected person – not casual contact (such as the workplace). Many of the recent meningococcal disease patients in Brooklyn reported the use of street drugs or having been in close contact with persons who use these drugs. We do not believe that the general population is at an increased risk for getting this illness. As always, DOHMH recommends you contact your doctor if you experience the symptoms of meningitis (see below).

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection that can cause meningitis (infection of the meninges, the thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord). It is caused by the bacteria, *Neisseria meningitidis*. Meningococcemia is the term for *Neisseria meningitidis* infections involving the bloodstream. This infection can also occur as pneumonia (an infection of the lungs) or in joints, such as the knees.

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease. Infants younger than 12 months of age have the highest rates of disease. Clusters of cases and outbreaks do occur but are rare in the United States.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread through direct close contact with an infected person. About 8% of healthy people carry these bacteria in their nose and throat without any signs of illness. Why certain people become ill upon acquiring the organism is not fully understood. Close living quarters, such as in college dormitories, favor transmission of the organism.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Although most people exposed to the *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria do not become seriously ill, some may develop fever, confusion, headache,

vomiting, stiff neck, blood infection and a rash. Symptoms of a blood infection typically include fever, generalized weakness and a rash.

How soon after an infection do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually occur within 5 days but may occur within 2 to 10 days after exposure to an infected person.

When and for how long is an infected person able to spread the disease?

A person with meningococcal disease may be contagious from the time of infection until 24 hours after starting treatment with antibiotics. The bacterium does not survive in the environment well and only infects humans.

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

Meningococcal disease is usually diagnosed in an ill person by laboratory identification of the bacteria from either blood or spinal fluid.

What is the treatment for meningococcal disease?

Several antibiotics are effective in treating the infection.

Should people who have been in contact with a diagnosed case of meningococcal disease receive preventive treatment?

The only people who need preventive medicines are people who have had prolonged close contact with a person with meningococcal infection. These close contacts are usually advised to take an antibiotic prescribed by their doctor. Casual contact, as might occur in a regular classroom, office, factory or on public transportation does not typically cause this disease.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal disease?

Presently, 2 vaccines are used to protect people at high risk against many meningococcal strains. These high-risk persons include college freshmen living in dormitories, those who are immunocompromised and people who travel to, or reside in, countries in which *Neisseria meningitidis* is common (see www.cdc.gov/travel).

More information can be obtained from:

www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/immun/meningococcal/

For more information on meningococcal meningitis, call 311.