

Meningitis

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is caused by a bacteria which is transmitted from person to person via close contact such as coughing, sneezing or direct contact (kissing, sharing coffee cups etc). This bacteria can infect the blood (sepsis), or the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). Symptoms of the disease start out as mild symptoms (fever, headache, vomiting, irritability, rash, stiff neck), but rapidly progress to shock, seizures, coma and death within 24- 48 hours of onset. Even with optimal treatment, 5-15% of people die from meningitis, and up to 20% of survivors are left with significant illness such as deafness, brain injury, seizures or limb amputations. The risk of getting meningitis in Canada is 1 in 100,000. The most common strains that cause disease in Canada are groups B and C.

There are five strains of the meningitis causing bacteria, four of which can be prevented with vaccination. The commonly used vaccine is called Menactra, and protects against groups A, C, Y and W-135. There is also a vaccine (Meningococcal C Vaccine) for protection against group C, which is part of the national immunization program for children less than 2 years of age. There is no vaccine to protect against Group B.

Who should be vaccinated?

Anyone aged 2 to 55 years old.

High risk groups including adolescents, anyone living in close quarters (ie. university residence, boarding school or the military), anyone travelling to high risk areas for meningitis (ie. parts of Africa), anyone who has had their spleen removed, or anyone who might have been exposed to meningitis during an outbreak.

Who should not be vaccinated?

Anyone who is moderately to severely ill at the time of vaccine, and anyone who has previously had Guillain-Barre Syndrome. This vaccine is safe to give to pregnant women, but hasn't been studied extensively and so is recommended only when a pregnant patient is at high risk of exposure.

What are the possible Side Effects?

Mild side effects include redness or pain at the injection site. These symptoms last for one to two days. A small percentage of people may develop a mild fever. Serious allergic reactions are very rare, and occur within a few minutes to a few hours after vaccination.