What Is Meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid in the spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis can be caused by either a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. For bacterial meningitis, it is also 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 given to 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.

What Are The Signs And Symptoms Of Meningitis?

High fever, headache and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over two years of age. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take one to two days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity 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, feeding poorly, irritable, or experience vomiting. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

How Is Meningitis Diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. The diagnosis is usually made from tests performed on spinal fluid. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible. Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for selection of correct antibiotics.

Can Meningitis Be Treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important that treatment is started early in the course of the disease. Appropriate antibiotic treatment for the most common types of bacterial meningitis reduces the risk of dying from meningitis to less than 15%, although the risk is higher among the elderly.

Is Meningitis Contagious?

Yes, some forms are bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as the common cold or flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

However, sometimes the bacteria that causes meningitis may spread to people who have had close or prolonged contact with a patient who has meningitis caused by Neisseria meningitidis (also called meningococcal meningitis) or Hib.

People in the same household, day care center or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) would be considered at increased risk of acquiring the infection. People who qualify as close contacts of a person with meningitis caused by N. meningitidis should receive antibiotics. Antibiotics for contacts of a person with Hib meningitis disease are no longer recommended if all contacts four years of age or younger are fully vaccinated against Hib disease (see below).
Are There Vaccines Against Meningitis?

Yes, there are vaccines against Hib and against some strains of N. meningitidis and many types of Streptococcus pneumoniae. Meningococcal vaccination is recommended for children at age 11, and for young adults living in college dormitories.

Travelers should receive the vaccine at least one week before departure. Information on areas for which meningococcal vaccine is recommended is located in the Traveler’s Health section of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s web site at http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/.

For more information, visit the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) web site at: http://www.cdc.gov

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If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu

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