

Meningitis FAQ's

What is meningitis?

Menigococcal meningitis is caused by a bacterium called *Neisseria meningitidis* that can infect the lining of the brain and spinal cord. There are a few different types or strains of *Neisseria meningitidis*. In the US, types B, C and Y cause the majority of disease.

How is bacterial meningitis treated?

Treatment should be started immediately. Most people with meningitis are hospitalized and treated with antibiotics. Depending on the severity of the infection, other treatments may also be necessary.

Is bacterial meningitis contagious?

Bacterial meningitis is contagious, but generally is transmitted through direct exchange of respiratory and throat secretions by close personal contact, such as coughing, sharing drinks, kissing and being in close proximity for an extended period. Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as 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.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of bacterial meningitis could include high fever, headache and stiff neck. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, confusion and sensitivity to light. Later in the illness, a rash that looks like purple blotches or spots on the arms, legs and torso may appear.

How long until symptoms begin to present themselves?

They can develop over several hours, or may take a few days. The incubation period can be one to two weeks.

Can someone be a "carrier" without experiencing symptoms?

Five to 25 percent of people may carry the bacteria in their nose or throat without getting sick, while still being contagious to others. This carrier state may last for days or months before spontaneously disappearing. *Most cases of meningitis are acquired through exposure to these asymptomatic carriers*

Can I be a carrier if I have received one or two doses of the vaccine?

Yes. It is unlikely that the vaccine will stop carriage, but it does protect the individual who received the vaccine from developing symptoms of the disease. It is unknown whether the vaccine would prevent acquisition of carriage. If you are carrying the bacteria, you can

transmit it to another person through close contact (exchange of saliva through kissing, sharing drinks, etc.).

What should I do if I develop flu-like symptoms or think I've been exposed to meningitis?

Students experiencing high fever with or without headache, stiff neck and other symptoms of meningitis should be examined at the Student Health Service or at the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center Emergency Department. Faculty and staff should go to the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center or contact their personal primary care physician. Visitors and those off-campus should go to the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.

How can transmission be prevented?

Do NOT share anything that comes in contact with the mouth, including:

- water bottles
- lip balm
- toothbrushes
- towels
- drinking glasses
- eating utensils
- cosmetics
- smoking materials
- food or drink from common source (e.g., punch bowl)

Do not cough into another person's face. Cough into your sleeve or a tissue. Wash or sanitize hands frequently. Make sure your vaccinations are up to date.

Should I wear a mask to prevent exposure?

The Centers for Disease control does not recommend wearing a surgical mask to prevent exposure.

Are special cleaning precautions for meningitis?

No. The bacteria that causes meningitis does not live long outside the body. There is no evidence showing that people are at risk of catching the infection by touching surfaces like doorknobs or keyboards.

Isn't there a vaccine for meningitis?

Yes, there is are vaccines for meningitis which are available at the Student Health Service. If you are interested receiving this vaccine, please call the Student Health Service (336-758-5218 menu option "0") to schedule an appointment for this vaccine. Most students have received this vaccine prior to coming to school. To determine if you have had this vaccine, log into the Student Health Web Portal: (<https://wfu.studenthealthportal.com/PyramedPortal/>); choose "My Profile" to see you immunization record.

Is this case of meningitis related to any other cases that have occurred?

There is no connection between this and any other known cases of meningitis.

Who is at higher risk from meningococcal meningitis?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, infants, adolescents and young adults age 16 to 21, and those over age 65 are at a higher risk of infection. People with complement component deficiency and those whose spleen is damaged or has been removed are also at increased risk. If you have questions or are concerned, please contact your personal physician.

More information is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/about/risk-factors.html>.

If alcohol sanitizes, is it safe to share an alcoholic beverage with my friend?

Sharing anything that comes in contact with the mouth (e.g., drinking cups, cans or bottles) can lead to the spread of meningitis. Alcoholic beverages do not contain enough alcohol by volume to prevent the spread of illness.

The consumption of alcohol may also lead to decreased judgment about sharing objects that come into contact with the mouth.

WFU Student Health Service (with acknowledgement to Princeton University Health Services).