

## Meningitis

**What is meningitis?** It is a relatively rare infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by viruses, bacteria, parasites, or fungi. It can last for one to two weeks and the symptoms can be severe

- Fever and listlessness or extreme irritability
- Headache, stiff neck, seizures
- Vomiting

Although most children recover, it can cause deafness learning disabilities, and death.

**How does meningitis spread?** Most meningitis spreads by:

- Being in a room together, coughing, and sneezing
- Touching mucus from the nose or saliva
- Kissing on the lips
- Sharing food, eating utensils, and mouthed toys

Children immunized against a common type of meningitis, hemophilus influenza B (HIB), are protected from that form of meningitis.

**When is meningitis contagious?** Depending on the type of meningitis:

From one to two weeks *before* the start of symptoms *throughout* the illness. Bacterial meningitis is not contagious after 24 to 48 hours of antibiotic treatment.

After exposure, it can take a few days to weeks to get sick.

**How do I know if my child has meningitis?** If you see the symptoms, see the doctor immediately. Meningitis is diagnosed by an exam, spinal tap, and lab tests.

**What should I do if my child has meningitis?**

Treatment: Follow your doctor's recommendations:

- Help the child recover by encouraging rest, nutrition, and plenty of fluids to drink.
- Children with severe illness or infection with bacteria, parasites, or fungus may need hospitalization  
And intravenous antibiotic medication

*If children or adults at home or school were recently exposed to HIB or meningococcal meningitis, special antibiotics can help prevent the illness.*

**Keep the child home** until symptoms resolve and until he or she feels well enough to participate and the health provider says it is not contagious. Notify your Head Start program immediately.

**To limit the spread:**

- Immunize your infants against HIB at two, four, six and 12 to 15 months of age.
- Report cases of meningitis to the local health department.
- Wipe noses with clean tissues, throw them away, and wash your hands.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow and away from people.
- Don't share food, pacifiers, bottles, or toothbrushes. Wash eating utensils, drinking cups, and mouthed toys well between uses
- Don't kiss children on the mouth.
- Open windows indoors and maximize outdoor play.