



1. What is bacterial meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis is an infection of the fluid in the spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. Bacterial meningitis is not common but usually serious, and can be life-threatening if not treated right away. Bacterial meningitis is caused by a bacteria and can cause brain damage, hearing loss, learning difficulties, and sometimes death.

2. How do you get bacterial meningitis?

You can get bacterial meningitis by:

- Direct contact with the respiratory and throat secretions (discharge) of an infected person (i.e. coughing, kissing).

People in the same household or day-care center, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral discharge are at increased risk. People with bacterial meningitis are contagious anywhere from two days to two weeks. It is often seen among travelers, infants, children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems.

3. How do you know if you have bacterial meningitis?

The most common sign and symptoms of bacterial meningitis include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Crankiness
- Confusion
- Sleepiness
- Discomfort looking into bright lights
- Neck stiffness

These symptoms can develop over several hours or they may take one to two days. Skin rash, loss of consciousness and seizures are signs of serious infection.

In newborns and small infants, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect.

Your doctor will do a spinal tap (a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is accessible) to determine if you have meningitis.

4. How is bacterial meningitis treated?

Early diagnosis and treatment is very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor right away. To confirm meningitis, 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 accessible. Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial meningitis. If not treated right away, bacterial meningitis may cause death.

5. How can bacterial meningitis be prevented?

- Vaccination is available and recommended for bacterial meningitis prevention.
- See your doctor right away if you experience symptoms of meningitis.
- Avoid sharing eating utensils, food, drinks, and any other items that may be contaminated by saliva.
- People living in the same home as an infected person, or who have had direct contact with an infected person's bodily secretions (saliva, nose mucus) must see a doctor as soon as possible.
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Sources

1. *Bacterial Meningitis*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/>
2. *Bacterial Meningitis*. L.A. County Department of Public Health <http://lapublichealth.org/acd/>
3. *Bacterial Meningitis*. California Department of Public Health. <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/MeningococcalDisease.aspx>
4. *Bacterial Meningitis*. Indications for use of meningococcal vaccine. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00046263.htm>
5. *Bacterial Meningitis*. Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center Medical College. <http://www.hmc.psu.edu/healthinfo/m/meningitis.htm>
6. *Bacterial Meningitis*. Department of Health Promotion and Education. <http://www.dhpe.org/infect/>

For additional resources, please visit the L.A. County Department of Public Health website <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov>.