

Adventist Healthcare: Health Tip of the Week

Meningitis

Meningitis is fatal in about 10 percent of the cases in the United States.

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. It is caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Both types of infection are spread by coughing, sneezing and kissing. They should not be regarded as either water-borne or air-borne because they cannot live for very long outside the human body.

- Viral is less severe and resolves without specific treatment. The viruses responsible can be picked up through poor hygiene or polluted water.
- Bacterial can be quite severe. There are different strains that live in the back of the nose/throat region. The bacteria gets into the bloodstream and travels to the meninges (lining surrounding the brain). Some forms are contagious. Antibiotics can prevent certain types from spreading and infecting other people.

What are the symptoms?

Some symptoms will appear while others may not appear at all. They can develop over several hours or they may take one to two days.

- High fever, headache and stiff neck are common symptoms in anyone over the age of two. Other symptoms may include: nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion and sleepiness.
 - Look for a rash. It can begin on any part of the body and starts as small clusters of tiny pin pricks. These develop into areas of skin damage that are purple in color. This is a key indicator of blood poisoning (septicemia). If not treated quickly, it can be fatal or mean the loss of limbs or fingers/toes.
- As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures. Bacterial meningitis can result in brain damage, hearing loss or learning disability.

Who is at risk?

- College freshmen, especially those who live in dormitories. All young adults 18-22 years of age should be vaccinated.
- Anyone (in the same household or day-care center) who is in direct contact with an infected person.
- Certain age groups are more susceptible than others: under the age of five, 16-25 years old and over 55.
- Research indicates that passive smoking in the household setting can increase the chances of someone contracting meningitis.
- Meningococcal and pneumococcal are the most common strains. They tend to affect young children and older people. Also, anyone who has already had a chronic illness such as heart disease, liver disease or diabetes.
- Some countries such as Africa and other high-risk areas experience large, periodic epidemics.

Travelers should check if meningococcal vaccine is recommended for their destination. They should receive the vaccine at least one week before departure.

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. If a rash is seen, it is vital that the sufferer be taken to the nearest ER without delay.

Sources: Meningitis Foundation of America, CDC * Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. The Health Tip of the Week is for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.