



Bacterial Meningitis

What is bacterial meningitis?

Bacterial meningitis is an infection of the meninges (the covering of the brain and spinal cord). Children with meningitis often have sudden symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness. Children may also have nausea, vomiting, and a worse headache when in a lighted area. They may become confused or difficult to awaken. Meningitis can resemble a bad case of the flu.

What causes bacterial meningitis?

Bacteria spread to the brain and spinal cord from an infection in another part of the body. The bacteria can spread directly from a nearby sinus infection, or can come from any other infection in the body by traveling through the bloodstream. Three childhood immunizations have been shown to decrease the risk of a child getting meningitis. These are:

- Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) vaccine
- Pneumococcal (PCV7) vaccine
- Meningococcal vaccine.

What is a spinal tap?

It is very important to find out whether a virus or bacteria are causing the problem. While children with viral meningitis usually get better without special treatment, bacterial meningitis can be life-threatening. This is why your child may need to have a test called a spinal tap. It is also called a lumbar puncture.

A spinal tap is a procedure in which a hollow needle is put in the spinal canal in the lower back to withdraw a small amount of spinal fluid. This procedure is very safe. There is no risk of your child becoming paralyzed because the needle is inserted below the level of the spinal cord. By examining the spinal fluid, the doctor can tell if the meningitis is caused by a virus or bacteria.

How long will the effects last?

Bacterial meningitis is a serious illness. Your child may recover without any problems if the infection was found early and treated with antibiotics. Even with appropriate treatment, some types of meningitis can cause brain damage ranging from deafness to paralysis to death.

How is it treated?

Your child will receive IV antibiotics (medicine through a vein) and care in the hospital. Your child may be given a prescription for antibiotics to continue taking after he or she is home from the hospital.

How can I help prevent it from spreading?

The bacteria causing the meningitis can be passed from person to person. The length of time your child will be contagious can be anywhere from 2 days to 2 weeks, depending on the type of bacteria. Your healthcare provider will let you know when your child is no longer contagious and can return to normal activities. Until then:

- Wash your child's hands frequently.
- Wash your hands frequently and make sure anyone who has contact with your child does the same.
- Do not let family members share cups or utensils.
- Avoid contact with saliva, such as by kissing your child.
- Ask your provider if other family members should take medicine or be vaccinated to prevent the disease from spreading.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your child starts to act very sick.
- You or someone who has had contact with your child develops symptoms of meningitis.

Call within 24 hours if:

You have other questions or concerns.