

MSAD # 13 / RSU #83

Health Alert

**Bacterial Meningitis
Important Notice to Parents**

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. The infection can be caused by bacteria or viruses. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without treatment.

Bacterial meningitis can be very severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, disability, and death. The two primary bacteria that cause meningitis are *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (Pneumococcal) or *Neisseria meningitidis* (Meningococcal). *Haemophilus influenzae* (H. flu) meningitis, which occurs mainly in children under five years, has been greatly reduced due to the *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) vaccine which most children receive. There are also vaccines for Pneumococcal and Meningococcal disease, but neither is required for school entry.

Symptoms of bacterial invasive disease can include bacteremia, meningitis, infected joints, or pneumonia and usually develop quickly (over several hours or up to 1–2 days) and include high fever and chills, stiff neck, headache, photophobia (light sensitivity), vomiting, and sometimes a rash, coma, and seizures. Diagnosis is made by a spinal tap and a blood or joint culture, depending on the symptoms.

When treatment with antibiotics is started early, the likelihood of survival is increased.

Meningococcal disease is transmitted person-to-person through direct contact with respiratory and throat secretions such as through kissing or coughing in close proximity. It may also be spread by contact with contaminated surfaces or objects such as sharing beverage containers, cigarettes, or other smoking related paraphernalia. Both meningococcal and pneumococcal organisms are often found in the upper respiratory tract of healthy persons. The bacteria are not transmitted through the air after an infected person has left the room.

Sneezing and coughing does contribute to the spread of the bacteria by contaminating surfaces. To help reduce the spread, cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, use a tissue or your sleeve, and dispose of used tissues. Adults may also become infected by contamination of the hands with stool from an infected infant or toddler during diaper changes. The most effective way to prevent infection is to wash your hands thoroughly and often.

Meningococcal disease is less contagious than the common cold or influenza. Outbreaks in schools or communities are extremely rare in this country.

The incubation period is variable depending on the agent, for meningococcal disease usually 2–10 days, for pneumococcal disease usually 1–4 days.

Meningitis is infectious until the bacteria are no longer present in discharges from the nose and mouth; susceptible organisms will disappear from the nose and throat within 24 hours after appropriate treatment is started. Your child's primary care provider will advise you on whether treatment is also required for family members or other individuals who may have been exposed to the respiratory secretions of a person with meningococcal disease. Risk of acquiring the disease in a normal classroom situation is typically low.

If anyone in your home has symptoms, call your primary care provider. Your doctor may want to test for the disease. Children diagnosed with meningococcal disease should be excluded from school until cleared by their primary care provider.

Please contact the school nurse, Mel Chadbourne, RN if you have any questions. More information is also available at the Maine CDC web site.