



Patient education: Bacterial meningitis (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a condition that can cause a fever, headache, and stiff neck. It happens when the lining that covers the brain and spinal cord (called the "meninges") gets inflamed or infected.

There are 2 main types of meningitis, depending on which germs are causing the infection. Bacteria cause bacterial meningitis. Viruses cause viral meningitis, which is also called aseptic meningitis. Both types of meningitis can cause similar symptoms.

It is very important that doctors figure out what kind of meningitis a person has. That's because bacterial meningitis is a medical emergency. If it is not treated quickly, it can lead to brain problems such as hearing loss or learning problems. It can also lead to death.

This article discusses bacterial meningitis.

What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

Symptoms of bacterial meningitis usually start suddenly, so people can get very sick over a short period of time.

The 3 main symptoms of bacterial meningitis are:

- Fever – But some people have a temperature that is lower than normal instead of a fever.
- Headache
- Stiff neck – This happens most often in adults and children. Babies might not get a stiff neck.

Sometimes, people can have other symptoms, such as:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Acting confused, or being hard to wake up
- Having light bother a person's eyes
- A rash that looks like red or purple spots on the skin that do not go away when touched
- Seizures – Seizures are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. They can make people pass out, or move or behave strangely.

Babies can also have other symptoms, including:

- Being more sleepy or fussy than usual
- Not feeding well
- A bulging soft spot on the skull

Should I see the doctor or nurse?

Yes. If you have a fever, headache, and stiff neck, go to the emergency department right away. If you think your child has meningitis, bring them to the emergency department right away.

Will I have tests?

Yes. Your doctor will learn about your symptoms and do an exam. They will do tests to see if you have meningitis and find out what type of bacteria is causing the infection. The tests can include:

- Blood tests
- A lumbar puncture (sometimes called a "spinal tap") – During this procedure, a doctor puts a thin needle into your lower back and removes a small amount of spinal fluid. Spinal fluid is the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. They will do lab tests on the spinal fluid.
- A CT scan of the brain – This is an imaging test that creates pictures of the brain.

How is bacterial meningitis treated?

People are treated in the hospital with:

- Antibiotic medicines that go into a vein through a tube called an "IV" – The antibiotics used depend on the type of bacteria causing the infection.
 - Fluids and other medicines that go into a vein – Some people with bacterial meningitis get medicines called "steroids." The steroids help protect your brain from the effects of the bacterial meningitis.
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Can bacterial meningitis be spread from 1 person to another?

Sometimes. It depends on the type of bacteria that's causing the infection. Some types of bacteria can be spread from 1 person to another.

Can bacterial meningitis be prevented?

Sometimes. Certain vaccines can help prevent bacterial meningitis. Make sure that you talk to your doctor or nurse about which vaccines you and your child should get to prevent the following infections:

- Meningococcus
- Pneumococcus
- Haemophilus influenzae type b, called "Hib" (for babies and young children)

Also, if someone in your home has bacterial meningitis, ask your doctor or nurse if you should take antibiotics. Sometimes, other people at home need to take antibiotics to keep from getting the infection.

Plus, you can help avoid getting sick by thoroughly washing your hands before eating, and not sharing cups or silverware.

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