



The Children's Doctor

All you need to know about... Meningococcal Infection



What is meningococcal infection?

Meningococcus is a type of bacteria. It can be found in the nose and throat of healthy people without causing disease. These people are called "carriers". Smokers are more likely to carry meningococcus. The bacteria are spread through contact with bodily fluids, eg through kissing, sneezing or coughing.

Meningococcus can invade the bloodstream causing septicaemia. It can also invade the lining of the brain causing meningitis.

What is meningococcal septicaemia?

Septicaemia is the presence of bacteria in the bloodstream causing toxicity. Children or young adults with meningococcal septicaemia are usually very unwell. It usually presents with fever and soon after a rash appears. The typical rash is purple or deep red dots and may look like bruises. When pressed, the rash does not usually fade. The illness can progress from initial fever to death within 24 hours. It is a medical emergency. If your child develops fever and a rash, medical help should be sought immediately.

What is meningococcal meningitis?

Meningitis is the presence of bacteria in the lining of the brain. Children with meningococcal meningitis may or may not have the typical rash seen in septicaemia. Meningitis usually presents with fever, headache and vomiting. However, very young children will not complain of headache and may not develop vomiting. Other symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, drowsiness, irritability, light sensitivity, seizures or loss of consciousness. Children with bacterial meningitis will usually look very unwell. If your child develops symptoms of meningitis, medical help should be sought immediately.

How is meningococcal infection treated?

Meningococcal infection can be treated very effectively with penicillin. It usually requires hospitalisation for intravenous antibiotics. With early treatment the outcome is excellent. If it is not diagnosed and treated early, the outcomes can be devastating. One in twenty infected children will die and others will require limb amputation secondary to gangrene.

How can I prevent meningococcal infection?

A vaccine is now available for the prevention of infection with meningococcus type C. This is not the most common form of meningococcus in Australia but is the only vaccine available. Despite immunisation, it is still possible to suffer from meningococcal infection with types other than type C.

If your child is unwell with fevers and/or a rash, you should seek medical help immediately.