

Meningitis Information

Hampton University's highest priority is the health and safety of the students as well as the surrounding community. Meningitis is a disease caused by either a virus or bacteria. In accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and Hampton University guidance, please see the following:

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord caused by either a virus or bacteria. [Viral Meningitis](#) is more common than bacterial meningitis and usually occurs in late spring and summer. Signs and symptoms of viral meningitis may include stiff neck, headache, nausea, vomiting and rash. Most cases of viral meningitis run a short uneventful course, since the causative agent is a virus, antibiotics are not effective. Persons who have had contact with an individual with viral meningitis do not require any treatment. [Bacterial Meningitis](#) occurs rarely and sporadically throughout the year, although outbreaks tend to occur in late winter and early spring, and may be caused by one of many different types of bacteria. Bacterial meningitis in college aged students may be due to an organism called meningococcal bacterial or Neisseria Meningitides. Because meningococcal meningitis can cause grave illness and rapidly progress to death, it requires early diagnosis and treatment. Persons who have had intimate contact with someone who has been diagnosed with meningococcal meningitis should seek medical attention so that they may get prophylactic therapy, which is a course of antibiotics. **Untreated meningococcal meningitis can be fatal.**

College Students and Meningitis Risk

Recent evidence has found that students residing on college campuses in residence halls appear to be at higher risk for meningococcal disease than college students overall. Research recently released by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) shows freshmen living in dormitories have a six times higher risk of meningococcal disease than college students overall.

Although anyone can come in contact with the bacteria that causes meningococcal disease, data also indicates that certain social behavior, such as exposure to passive and active smoking, bar patronage, and excessive alcohol consumption, may put students at increased risk for the disease. Students with respiratory infections, compromised immunity, those in close contact to a known case, and travelers to endemic areas of the world are also at increased risk. Cases and outbreaks usually occur in the late winter and early spring when school is in session.

How is Meningitis Spread?

Many of the viruses that cause meningitis are spread through saliva or feces. Bacteria are spread from person to person through saliva (spit). Most people may already have immunity (natural protection) from many of these germs. You must be in **close contact** with a person's saliva in order for the bacteria to spread. Close contact includes activities such as kissing, sneezing or coughing on someone, sharing water bottles, lipsticks, mouth pieces on musical instruments, sharing eating/drinking utensils, or sharing cigarettes with someone who is sick. Classmates and co-workers are not normally considered to be at high risk for getting bacterial meningitis, unless they have special, close contact with a person who is sick from bacterial meningitis. Most of the germs that cause meningitis disease can spread from person to person, but they will not cause the disease just by getting in to the throat.

Signs and Symptoms of Illness:

Meningococcal Meningitis

- sudden onset of a high fever, stiff neck or neck pain, headache, nausea vomiting, and/or mental confusion.
- changes in behavior such as confusion, sleepiness, and being hard to wake up are important symptoms of this illness.
- a rash may appear, often involving the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.
- in babies the only signs of this illness may be acting more tired than usual, acting more irritable than usual, and eating less than usual. Babies with meningitis will usually have a fever, but this is not a reliable sign of illness.

Anyone who has these symptoms should contact their doctor right away.

Meningococemia (bacterial infection in the blood)

- sudden onset of fever, chills, and feeling unusually weak or tired
- a rash may be present, often involving the palms of the hands and soles of the feet

Anyone who has these symptoms should contact their doctor right away.

How are these illnesses treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat people with both (meningococcal) meningitis and meningococemia.

Why do close contacts need to be treated?

Close contacts of a sick person who has meningococcal disease with antibiotics because the bacteria may spread from the sick person to other people through contact with the saliva (spit) of the sick person.

Preventive Measures

Avoid contact with the nasal or oral secretions of others. Wash your hands frequently. Get a minimum of eight hours of sleep nightly, exercise and practice good nutrition. This will boost your immune system. If you drink alcohol, then do so responsibly and in moderation (excessive alcohol consumption is believed, by some health authorities, to increase susceptibility to meningococcal meningitis). Do not smoke.

Is there a vaccine to protect me from getting sick?

There is a vaccine to protect against meningococcal disease. The vaccine has been shown to provide protection against the most common strains of the disease. The vaccine has few side effects and those that occur are usually mild, consisting primarily of redness and pain at the side of the injection.