

# Meningococcal disease

## What is it?

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial illness that presents in 2 main ways:

- **Meningitis:** infection of the membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord
- **Septicaemia:** infection of the bloodstream. It can effect anyone – but it's more common in babies, children under the age of 5 years – especially Maori and Pacific children, teenagers, and young adults.

People with signs and symptoms suspicious of meningococcal infection need to seek immediate medical advice from their doctor or a hospital. A delay of even hours can be fatal. Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics but early treatment is very important.

**If you or someone in your household is sick with one or more of the symptoms outlined below, take action immediately.**

- Ring a doctor, medical centre, after hours clinic or Healthline (0800 611 116) right away – whether it is day or night.
- Say what the symptoms are.
- If you think it might be meningococcal disease, don't be put off. Insist on immediate action.
- Even if a person has been checked by a doctor, they should still be watched.
- If they get worse go straight back to a doctor or the hospital. Do not leave them alone.
- If it's an emergency call 111 and ask for an ambulance.

**It is important that you are aware of the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease, and seek medical advice quickly if you're concerned.**

## What are the symptoms?

Meningococcal disease can look like influenza (the flu) in its early stages, but it quickly gets much worse. The symptoms and signs may not all show up at once, and the illness may develop gradually over one or two days, or much more quickly over a few hours. People with meningococcal disease may have some or all of the following:

### Babies and children

- Fever
- Crying, unsettled, irritable
- Refusing drinks or feeds or vomiting
- Sleepy, floppy, harder to wake
- Stiff neck or dislike of bright lights
- Reluctant to walk
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

### Adults

- Fever
- Headache, stiff neck
- Vomiting
- Sleepy, confused, delirious, unconscious
- Joint pains, aching muscles
- Rash – purple or red spots or bruises

## Immunisation

There are several different strains of meningococcal bacteria, but there is not a vaccine that protects against all of them. People with specific medical conditions are vaccinated against groups A, C, Y and W135 and it is recommended (but not funded) that young people living in hostel accommodation are vaccinated against group C disease. The main use of meningococcal vaccines is to control outbreaks and epidemics.

*If you or your child is unwell, call your family doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116 for free advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day 7 days a week.*

For further information call Regional Public Health on (04) 570 9002 or visit [www.rph.org.nz](http://www.rph.org.nz)

**Regional Public Health**

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None of the vaccines provide long-term protection. Even if you or your child have been immunised with the MeNZB™ vaccine or one of the other meningococcal vaccines, you or your child can still get meningococcal disease from other strains of bacteria, so you need to know about the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you would like more information about what vaccines are available and the cost of being immunised.

## For further information

- [www.health.govt.nz/yourhealth-topics/diseases-and-illnesses/meningococcal-disease](http://www.health.govt.nz/yourhealth-topics/diseases-and-illnesses/meningococcal-disease)
- [www.immune.org.nz/diseases/meningococcal-disease](http://www.immune.org.nz/diseases/meningococcal-disease)
- Information about meningococcal disease is available in Maori, Samoan and Tongan at <https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/meningococcal-disease-know-symptoms>