

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# Bacterial Meningitis



## Burlington County Health Department

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**Public Health**  
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Burlington County Health Department  
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## What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection that causes inflammation (swelling) of the brain and spinal cord membranes. Bacterial meningitis is very serious and can be deadly. It can affect anyone in any age group, though babies are at a higher risk than others.

## What causes bacterial meningitis?

There are several different bacteria that cause bacterial meningitis; some more dangerous than others. A sample of spinal fluid is needed to find out if someone has meningitis, and to see what type of germ caused it.

## What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis include sudden onset of fever, headache, and stiff neck. Additional symptoms include nausea, vomiting, increased sensitivity to light, and confusion. These symptoms can appear quickly or over several days. Normally they develop within 3 to 7 days after exposure. Infants may have swelling on the soft spot of their head. Later symptoms of untreated bacterial meningitis can be very severe, like seizures or coma. **Anyone who thinks they have meningitis should see a doctor as soon as possible.** If a person is suspected to have meningitis, samples of blood or cerebrospinal fluid (fluid near the spinal cord) are taken and sent to a lab for testing. It is important to know the specific cause of meningitis because that helps doctors understand how to treat the disease, and possibly how bad it will get.

## How is bacterial meningitis spread?

Bacterial meningitis is spread from person to person. It travels in an infected person's saliva (spit) during close contact, like kissing or being coughed on. Most, but not all, of bacteria that causes meningitis are not highly contagious and it is not spread by casual contact or simply breathing the air where an infected person has been. Healthy people can carry the bacteria that causes meningitis in their nose or throat with no symptoms of the disease.

## How can meningitis be prevented?

The best way to prevent bacterial meningitis is to get the vaccine. If a person is exposed to the saliva of someone with bacterial meningitis, public health officials or your doctor may recommend an antibiotic to prevent disease.

Frequent handwashing with soap and water can help prevent the spread of many viruses and bacteria. Not sharing food, drinks, or utensils with other people can also help stop the spread of germs.

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics. It is important to start treatment as soon as possible.

## Where can I get more information about meningitis?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609)-265-5533

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