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MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

DHMA's information on meningococcal disease



Meningococcal disease

Meningococcal disease may present as either meningitis or septicaemia (blood poisoning), or a combination of both. The disease occurs because of bacteria called meningococci.

The disease is rare and not very contagious, so more than one case only occurs rarely. But it is a serious disease that you should be alert to, especially if others in your immediate surroundings have been diagnosed with the disease. The most important precaution is to watch carefully for any signs of the disease, because early treatment is very important. When treated early, most patients recover fully.

Close contacts will be given preventive treatment and in most cases be offered vaccination.

The Danish Health and Medicines Authority will define the relevant group of persons and ensure that preventive measures are taken towards this group.

Read more below about how the disease presents and how to prevent and treat the disease.

Symptoms

The disease may start with flu-like symptoms. Within 1-2 days, the temperature rises to 38-40°C or more. The fever can occur suddenly and be accompanied by chills or cramps. Other symptoms include severe headache, vomiting and loss of appetite and thirst. The patient becomes drowsy or restless, racked with pain and irritable, perhaps dizzy. Meningococcal disease can also cause bleeding in the skin that shows up as red or purple spots or marks. In some cases, the patient has tension in the neck and back so that forward bending of the head is painful and difficult.

The symptoms may be somewhat different in infants. The children may be less active, unwilling to eat or drink, cry at the slightest touch, become increasingly lethargic and vomit.

Meningococcal disease can develop within a few hours. Therefore, it is important to take action if the patient's condition deteriorates.

Treatment

Meningococcal disease is treated during hospitalisation. The disease can almost always be cured if treatment is initiated early in the process.

Occurrence

In Denmark, around 70 people are diagnosed with meningococcal disease every year, most of the patients have had no contact with each other.

The disease is most common in children and adolescents, but occurs in all ages. Most cases of meningococcal disease occur alone. Occasionally, several cases occur in the same household or within the same area at about the same time.

Transmission

Meningococci spread from person to person with droplets generated by coughing and sneezing. The patient is almost always infected by a casual, healthy carrier, and not by a patient with meningococcal disease.

In the patient's environment, there may be a slightly increased risk of disease development for a period, most notably at the beginning. Particularly in the household, but in some cases also in institutions, school class or similar.

Outside the body, the bacteria die rapidly. The disease is not transmitted through food. There is no reason for special cleaning of toys or rooms.

Prevention

It is very important to pay attention to signs of the disease and call the doctor at the slightest suspicion of meningococcal disease.

Following a case of meningococcal disease, the close contacts will be offered preventive treatment with antibiotics, most often the members of the household. This happens by agreement between the treating doctor and the Danish Health and Medicines Authority. In most cases, the treatment is given as one tablet.

Although preventive treatment is effective, it does not provide complete protection against disease development as infection may occur again. Therefore, you should still pay attention to the signs of the disease.

Vaccination

The Danish Health and Medicines Authority will decide who should be offered vaccination and will contact the relevant persons. It is often the persons who have received preventive treatment with antibiotics. The vaccine provides good protection after 5-6 days, but only against the meningococcal type you are vaccinated against. Protection wears off after a few years.

Important

The most important precaution is to pay attention to signs of the disease and contact a doctor at the slightest suspicion of meningococcal disease in the surroundings.

If you cannot reach the doctor, you can either call an ambulance (tel. 112) or bring the patient to hospital.

For more information, please consult your doctor.