



2008 Immunization Issue Brief

Meningococcal Disease

July 2008

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the tissues surrounding a person's spinal cord and brain. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ.

Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss or learning disability.

Before the 1990s, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis, but **new vaccines being given to all children as part of their routine immunizations have reduced the occurrence of invasive disease due to Hib.** Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

What are the signs & symptoms of meningitis?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., sharing drinks, kissing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Are there vaccines against meningitis?

Yes, there are vaccines against Hib, against some serogroups of *N. meningitidis* (referred to as MCV4) and many types of *Streptococcus*

pneumoniae. Meningococcal vaccines cannot prevent all types of the disease. But they do protect many people who might become sick if they didn't get the vaccine.



MCV4 is recommended for all children at their routine preadolescent visit (11 to 12 years of age). For those who have never gotten MCV4 previously, a dose is recommended at high school entry. Other adolescents who want to decrease their risk of meningococcal disease can also get the vaccine. MCV4 is the preferred vaccine for people 11 to 55 years of age in these risk groups.

Source: NCIRD; May 28, 2008

To learn more about the impact of meningitis and policy implications, please make plans to attend:

Health Policy Breakfast

July 29, 2008

730 – 830am

Alleghany Room

Charleston Marriott

RSVP by July 18th to WIN (see below)

For More Information

About Meningitis Vaccine contact:

West Virginia Immunization Program
West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources
(304) 558-2188 or (800) 642-3634 (in WV only)
www.wvdhhr.org/immunizations/

About WV Immunization Network (WIN):

Center for Rural Health Development
Sharon L. Lansdale, President/CEO
(304) 397-4071 or sharon.lansdale@wvruralhealth.org

