Meningococcal Disease (Meningitis)

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid that surrounds the spinal cord and the brain. It is sometimes referred to as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is an inflammation (the body's way of reacting to injury and/or infection) of the membranes surrounding the brain. Meningitis is usually caused by a virus or germ (bacteria) infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important. This is because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and goes away without specific treatment.

Bacterial (germ) meningitis can be severe. It can result in:

- Brain damage.
- Hearing loss.
- Learning disability.

For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics (medications which kill germs) can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Today the leading causes of bacterial meningitis are:

- Streptococcus pneumonia.
- Neisseria meningitidis.

Other types of bacterial meningitis are:

- Haemophilus influenza Type B.
- Neisseria.
- Streptococcus.

SYMPTOMS

Common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years are:

- High fever.
- Headache.
- Stiff neck.

These symptoms can develop over several hours or they may take 1 to 2 days.

Other symptoms may include:

- Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach).
- Vomiting.
- Sleepiness.
- Discomfort looking into bright lights.
- Confusion.

In severe cases, a scattered purplish rash develops that spreads and gets larger over several hours. This happens when the infection spreads to the blood stream.

In newborns and small infants, the classic symptoms may be difficult to detect. These include:

- Fever.
- Headache.
- Neck stiffness.

The infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have convulsions (seizures).

DIAGNOSIS

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. The patient should see a caregiver immediately if symptoms occur. The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap. This is when a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back to obtain

fluid (CSF, cerebrospinal fluid). The fluid is examined and cultures are done. The type of bacteria causing the infection is identified. Cultures are done to grow out the bacteria on a small plate and determine which antibiotic is most likely to kill the germ.

TREATMENT

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with many antibiotics. Treatment must be started early in the course of the disease. Antibiotic treatment of common types of bacterial meningitis should reduce the risk of dying from meningitis to below 15%. The risk is higher among the elderly.

How contagious (catchy) is meningitis?

Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the exchange of lung and throat secretions (for example, coughing and kissing). None of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as the common cold or the flu. They are not spread by casual contact. They are not spread by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

The bacteria that cause meningitis have spread through close or prolonged contact with a patient who has certain types of bacterial meningitis. Those considered at increased risk of getting the infection are:

- Health care workers.
- People in the same household.
- Day-care center workers, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions would be.

Those who have close contacts at high risk should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease.

Vaccines

There are effective vaccines that protect against several types of bacterial meningitis. Talk to your caregiver about specific vaccines that are recommended for adults and children.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- If you have been diagnosed as having viral meningitis, these most often get better on their own without treatment. If allowed to go home, notify your caregiver immediately if there is an increase in any of the problems that brought you to your caregiver. Also notify your caregiver if you develop a temperature greater than 102º F (38.9º C).
- It your meningitis is caused by a germ (bacterium), and you have been hospitalized, make sure to take all of your medications as directed if you are allowed to go home at a later time.
- Be aware that these infections are contagious and that close contacts should seek medical care if they develop the symptoms described above.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop a high fever, neck stiffness, or confusion.
- You have a headache that becomes severe or does not respond to pain medication.
- You have a seizure.
- You develop a rash.
- You are taking antibiotics and are not getting better.
- You develop severe vomiting or are unable to tolerate food or fluids.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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