Meningitis

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid and membranes surrounding a person's spinal cord and brain. It is sometimes called spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or germ (*bacterial*) infection. It is important to know whether a virus or bacterium is causing your meningitis. The *severity* of illness (how bad it is) changes the treatment methods. *Viral meningitis* is generally less severe. It tends to go away without treatment. *Bacterial meningitis* can be quite severe. It may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disabilities. It is also important to know the type of bacteria causing bacterial meningitis. Medications that kill germs (*antibiotics*) can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people.

SYMPTOMS

Common symptoms of meningitis over the age of 2 years:

- High fever.
- Headache.
- Stiff neck.

These symptoms can develop over many hours. They can also take 1 to 2 days to develop. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures (*convulsions*).

Other symptoms may include:

- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Discomfort looking into bright lights.
- Sleepiness.
- Vomiting.
- Confusion.

In **newborns and small infants**, symptoms include:

- Fever.
- Headache.
- Neck stiffness.
- Acting slow and inactive.
- Seeming irritable
- Vomiting, or eating poorly.

DIAGNOSIS

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If you have symptoms, you should see a doctor right away. Growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid can show the cause of meningitis. Caregivers get spinal fluid through a spinal tap. During a spinal tap, a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back.

TREATMENT

- Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of helpful antibiotics. It is important to start treatment early in the disease. Risk of death is higher among elderly and patients who have problems with immunity. This includes people with HIV Infection (AIDS).
- Some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria are spread through the respiratory and throat secretions. An example of this is coughing and kissing. None of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as catchy (*contagious*) as the common cold or flu. They are not spread by casual contact. They are not spread by simply breathing the air of a person with meningitis. People in the same household or day-care center, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral mouth fluids (*secretions*), such as a boyfriend or girlfriend, would be at increased risk of getting the infection. People who came into contact with a person with meningitis caused by the germ *N. meningitidis* should receive antibiotics. This will prevent them from getting the disease. Antibiotics are no longer recommended for contacts of a person with *Hib meningitis* disease, if all contacts 4 years of age or younger are fully vaccinated against *Hib* disease.

VACCINES TO PREVENT MENINGITIS

- There are vaccines against *Hib*, some strains of *N. meningitides*, and many types of *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. The vaccines against *Hib* are very safe and highly effective.

- There is also a vaccine that protects against four strains of *N. meningitidis*. College freshman are at higher risk for meningococcal disease. College students who live in dormitories are also at risk. Overseas travelers should check to see if a vaccine is recommended for their destination. Travelers should receive the vaccine at least one week before departure, if possible. You can find information on travel areas for which a vaccine is recommended. You can find this information by calling the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at (800)-232-4636.**
- There are vaccines to prevent meningitis due to *S. pneumoniae* (also called pneumococcal meningitis). These can also prevent other forms of infection due to *S. pneumoniae*. The pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine is recommended for all persons over 65 years of age. It is also recommended for younger persons at least 2 years old with certain long lasting (*chronic*) medical problems. There is a recently licensed vaccine (pneumococcal conjugate vaccine) that appears to be effective in infants. This new vaccine is effective for the prevention of pneumococcal infections. It is often recommended for all children greater than 2 years of age.

Document Released: 12/08/2003 Document Re-Released: 09/26/2009
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.