

Bacterial Meningitis Frequently Asked Questions

What is bacterial meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the membranes that protect the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis is most often caused by a virus (viral meningitis), but can also be caused by bacteria (bacterial meningitis). Bacterial meningitis is rare, but is usually serious. It can be life-threatening, if not treated right away.

How does it spread?

Common examples of how people spread these germs include:

- During childbirth,
- Coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others,
- Sharing saliva, or
- Eating contaminated food.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually come on suddenly. Symptoms in adults can include:

- Fever,
- Headache,
- Stiff neck,
- Nausea,
- Vomiting,
- Sensitivity to light, or
- Confusion.

Symptoms above may be hard to spot in babies, if they show symptoms at all.

Symptoms that may be easier to spot include:

- Being slow or inactive,
- Irritability,
- Throwing up,
- Feeding poorly,
- Having abnormal reflexes, or
- Having a bulging fontanelle (the “soft spot” on a baby’s head).



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How do you get tested?

Doctors can diagnose bacterial meningitis with a blood draw or spinal tap. Spinal tap fluid is the liquid inside of the spine. A laboratory test will see what is causing the infection. Knowing what type of bacteria is causing the infection will help doctors to treat it.

Who is at risk?

Certain factors increase a person's risk for getting bacterial meningitis. These include:

- **Age:** Babies are at increased risk for bacterial meningitis compared to people in other age groups.
- **Group setting:** Infectious diseases tend to spread where large groups of people gather.
- **Travel:** Travelers may be at increased risk for infectious diseases.

How can a person prevent it?

Vaccines are the best way to prevent certain types of bacterial meningitis. There are vaccines for four types of bacteria that can cause meningitis:

- **Meningococcal vaccines** (MenACWY and MenB) help protect against *N. meningitidis*.
- **Pneumococcal vaccines** (PCV15 or PCV20) help protect against *S. pneumoniae*.
- **Haemophilus influenzae serotype b (Hib) vaccines** help protect against Hib.
- **Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine** helps protect against tuberculosis disease, but is not widely used in the United States.

To learn more about bacterial meningitis vaccinations, visit the county website (sdiz.org) by scanning the QR code here.

