

WELLNESS UPDATE 2002, #3

MENINGITIS

Meningitis is a relatively rare disease which causes inflammation and swelling of the lining surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It is caused by a variety of different bacteria, fungi, and viruses. The two most common forms of meningitis are bacterial meningitis and viral meningitis. Both have similar symptoms and are spread through close personal contact and the direct exchange of saliva. **Many people carry the organisms that cause meningitis without any signs of illness, while others develop serious symptoms.** Meningitis can occur in anyone, but is most common in infants, children and young adults.

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VIRAL MENINGITIS

Viral meningitis is the most common form of meningitis. Viral meningitis is usually not serious, but can make a person very ill with flu-like symptoms. It is caused by viruses called enteroviruses. Enteroviruses are shed in feces and discharges from the mouth and nose. Viral meningitis usually occurs in late summer and early fall. Because it is caused by a virus, (like the common cold) there is not an effective treatment for viral meningitis. It simply must run its course which usually lasts less than 10 days. ***Bed rest, fluids, and fever reducing, pain relieving medications may make a person more comfortable during recovery.***

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SYMPTOMS OF MENINGITIS

Symptoms of meningitis usually occur within 10 days after exposure to someone with meningitis. Common symptoms include:

- 1) **rapid onset of severe headache,**
- 2) **fever greater than 101 degrees,**
- 3) **stiff neck, and,**
- 4) **vomiting/nausea.**

Symptoms that occur less frequently include abdominal discomfort, red or purple skin rash, chest pain, changes in consciousness and mental alertness, and/or paralysis.

BACTERIAL MENINGITIS

Bacterial meningitis is more rare than viral meningitis because the bacteria causing it can only live outside the body for a very short time. **About 35% of the population are carriers of bacterial meningitis. Most cases of bacterial meningitis that occur in Iowa are called “sporadic cases.” This means the person who becomes ill has been carrying the bacteria for a period of time before getting sick. They are NOT cases of one person infecting another.**

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Bacterial meningitis usually occurs when the body’s resistance to disease is low, such as following a viral infection or some type of trauma to the person’s nose and/or throat. There is no reason to believe anyone else is at risk in these situations. **BACTERIAL MENINGITIS CAN BE VERY SERIOUS, EVEN FATAL, AND REQUIRES PROMPT TREATMENT BY MEDICAL PERSONNEL.**

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It is very difficult to differentiate between the symptoms of viral and bacterial meningitis. **Anyone with mild flu-like symptoms that progresses to rapid onset of severe headache, fever greater than 101 degrees, stiff neck, vomiting and/or nausea should seek medical attention immediately.**

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PREVENTION OF MENINGITIS

The risk of contracting any type of meningitis through athletic participation is very small.

Meningitis is NOT generally spread through the water supply, in swimming pools, through ventilation systems, by routine contact in classrooms, by taking a shower, or using the restroom. **It is spread through close personal contact and the direct exchange of saliva.** The following precautions should always be used to reduce the risk of contracting meningitis, or other viral infections.

DO NOT:

- 1) **share drinking utensils** (cups, glasses, water bottles, pop cans, pop bottles, etc.);
- 2) **share musical instruments, or athletic, mouthpieces;**
- 3) **share eating utensils or share food;**
- 4) **share chapstick, lipstick, or any other items that have come in contact with someone else's mouth;**
- 5) **have close personal contact with people who exhibits flu-like symptoms.**

DO:

- 1) **cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough;**
- 2) **wash your hands frequently with antibacterial soap,** especially after using the restroom and before eating;
- 3) **stay home if you're ill.**

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An individual's general health status plays an important role in not contracting meningitis. One can boost their immune system by eating a balanced diet, getting adequate rest and sleep, obtaining moderate exercise, and managing excessive stress.

Vaccination for bacterial meningitis is available, but is not recommended for the general population. Vaccination is recommended by the Iowa Department of Public Health for **1)** those people traveling to countries where the bacterial meningitis rate is higher than in the U.S., and, **2)** people who, for the first time in their life, will be living in a mass setting where there they can expect a great deal of stress (college, boot camp, etc.).

Questions and/or comments about meningitis, or other areas dealing with student-athlete's wellness, are welcome and encouraged. They should be directed to Alan Beste, ATC, Administrative Assistant, Iowa High School Athletic Association, PO Box 10, Boone, IA 50036. (515) 432-2011, <abeste@iahsaa.org>

Sources: "Bacterial Meningitis" <www.co.oakland.mi.us/c_serv/health/factsheet/cd/fs-b-men-cd.html>; Griffith, H. Winter, MD. Complete Guide to Symptoms, Illness, and Surgery, 2nd Edition, 1989; Merck, Sharp, & Dohme Research Laboratories, The Merck Manual, 1982; "Viral Meningitis," <www.charm.net/-epil_men.htm>; "Tompkins County Health Department Position on Voluntary Meningococcal Immunization," <www.co.tompkins.ny.us/health/meningoc.html>; "Meningitis," <emernet.emergency.com/meningits.htm>, Quinlisk, Dr. Patricia, MD, Iowa Department of Public Health Chief Epidemiologist. Conversation on February 13, 2002.