Okanagan Meningococcal Outbreak

Questions and Answers

Q: What is meningococcal disease?
A: Meningococcal disease (also known as Invasive Meningococcal Disease) is a serious and deadly infectious illness caused by a type of bacteria called Neisseria meningitides.

Q: What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?
A: Meningococcal disease is very serious and can rapidly worsen within a few hours. The symptoms of meningococcal disease can vary depending on the affected body parts. The two common types are meningococcal meningitis and meningococcal septicemia.

- Meningococcal meningitis occurs when bacteria cause inflammation of the protective lining around the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms of meningitis include sudden fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, increased sensitivity to light, and confusion.
- Meningococcal septicemia occurs when bacteria enters the blood. Symptoms of meningococcal septicemia include tiredness, severe aches and pain, vomiting, and skin rash.

Q: How is meningococcal disease spread to others?
A: People spread meningococcal bacteria to other people by sharing respiratory and throat secretions (saliva or spit) through coughing, kissing, sharing water bottles, etc. Generally, it takes close or lengthy contact to spread these bacteria. Fortunately, they are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or the flu. People do not catch these germs through casual contact or by breathing air where someone with meningococcal disease has been.

Q: What is the difference between meningococcal disease and meningitis?
A: Many types of bacteria, viruses, and fungi can cause inflammation of the protective lining around the brain and spinal cord that is known as meningitis. Neisseria meningitides is among the bacteria that can cause meningitis that is often very severe.

Q: What are the symptoms of meningitis?
A: The most common symptoms among teens and young adults are:

- Stiff and painful neck, especially when you try to touch your chin to your chest
- Fever
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Trouble staying awake
- Seizures

It is very important to see a doctor right away if you or your child has these symptoms. Only a doctor can tell whether they are caused by viral or bacterial meningitis. See the HealthLink file for more information.
Q: When is an outbreak declared?
A: Outbreaks are declared when there is an unexpected increase in the number of cases of a particular illness.

Q: What communities are included in the Okanagan outbreak?
A: Please refer to this map.

Q: What is the risk to the general public?
A: The risk to the general public is low. Meningococcal infection is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or close face-to-face contact. It can also be spread through saliva. This can occur through activities such as kissing or sharing of food, drinks, cigarettes, lipsticks, water bottles, mouth guards used for sports, or mouthpieces of musical instruments.

Whenever a new case is identified, we actively follow up with anyone who has been in close contact with that individual, and we provide them with antibiotics if necessary. This process helps reduce the spread of infection.

Q: What do I need to know if I’m visiting the Okanagan for an event?
A: Travellers to the Okanagan are not at increased risk of meningococcal disease. Visiting sports teams or anyone staying three weeks or less in the area will not be eligible for free immunization.

Precautions should be taken to prevent the sharing of bacteria. Avoid sharing water bottles, cigarettes, lipstick or food with others. Individuals who show symptoms such as fever, headache, stiff neck, or vomiting should seek medical attention immediately.

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection that occurs rarely in Canada that is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or close face-to-face contact. It can also spread through saliva. This can occur through activities such as kissing or sharing of food, drinks, cigarettes, lipsticks, water bottles, mouth guards used for sports, or mouthpieces of musical instruments.

Q: Is the Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine a routine vaccination?
A: This vaccine has been offered to grade 9 students in BC since 2016, as part of the routine immunization program. If you have received this vaccine as part of the grade 9 immunization program in 2016/17, you don’t need to be re-immunized.

Students who have not received this vaccine are recommended to attend an immunization clinic at their school. For more information about clinic locations and times, visit interiorhealth.ca. If you are unsure if your child has received this vaccine, call your local public health centre for a record.

Q: I believe my child was immunized for meningococcal disease as an infant and/or in grade 6—will that provide them enough protection?
A: No. Children who received meningococcal immunization as an infant or in the Grade 6 program in BC would have received the meningococcal C vaccine, which does not provide protection against the type of bacteria causing this outbreak. The Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine being offered during the outbreak, provides protection against four types of bacteria (types C, A, Y and W135). Anyone who has received the Quadrivalent vaccine within the past three years, does not need to be re-immunized. If it has been more than three years, you may qualify for another dose. To learn more about this vaccine, visit HealthLink BC.

Q: Where can individuals who are 15 to 19 but do not attend school receive the vaccine?
A: Please check interiorhealth.ca for immunization clinic dates and times.

Q: Do I need to have my PHN (Personal Health Number) or care card in order to get the vaccine?
A: No. The vaccine is publicly funded and free for all 15-19 year olds living in the Okanagan. You do not need to have a care card/PHN. If you have a care card, please bring it with you so your records can be updated to show your immunization status.

Q: What are typical reactions to the vaccine?
A: The Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine (groups A, C, Y, W-135) can cause redness, swelling and pain at the site where the vaccine was given. Other symptoms may include headache, chills, fever, nausea, muscle soreness and fatigue. Rarely, people can have a severe allergic reaction to the vaccination (anaphylaxis). To learn more about this vaccine, visit HealthLink BC.

Q: Is the Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine a live vaccine?
A: No. It is an inactivated vaccine.

Q: My child has a cold. Is it safe for them to get the vaccine?
A: Yes. Minor or moderate illness, with or without a fever, is not a barrier to immunization.

Q: Can individuals who are not in grades 9-12 or 15 to 19 years old receive the vaccine?
A: No. Based on the confirmed cases Interior Health has seen, the risk is highest in the grade 9-12 / 15-19 year old population in the Okanagan, so free vaccine is being provided to that higher risk group. For individuals outside of the grade range or 15-19 year old age group that would still like to be immunized, please contact your local pharmacist or travel clinic to purchase vaccine.

Q: What about individuals that recently turned 20 years old?
A: If an individual was 19 years old as of Dec. 14, 2017 (when the outbreak was declared) and has since turned 20, they are eligible for free vaccine.

Q: Why is the vaccine only being offered to people in grades 9-12 or 15-19 year olds?
A: A significant number of cases in the past six months have been within this age group in the Okanagan. Immunization is being offered to this population as they are identified as being at higher risk of acquiring meningococcal disease.

Q: Are there any other groups that are eligible for immunization?
A: There are some people eligible to get the vaccine free of charge if they have certain risk factors, such as, immunodeficiency.

Q: My child is 14 but in grade 9 are they eligible for the vaccine?
A: Children in grade 9 in BC are eligible for the routine dose of the Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine. This is being provided early to all grade 9 students (including those currently aged 14), who live in the Okanagan, as part of the outbreak response.

Q: I have a younger child at home, should they be immunized as well?
A: At this time, public health resources are being directed to the highest risk groups. The risk for other age groups is very low. Parents of younger children may choose to purchase the vaccine from a pharmacy or travel clinic. If you think your child is at risk of meningococcal disease, talk to your health care provider or pharmacist.

Q: Why are grade 7 and 8 students not getting offered the meningococcal vaccine?
A: There have been no cases of meningococcal disease in individuals in this age group. This bacteria is spread by very close contact, typically within same age cohorts. Our information demonstrates that the highest risk group is students grade 9-12 and/or individuals 15-19, which is why we are targeting this age group.

Q: Where will vaccinations be offered and when?
A: Immunization clinics for students in Grades 9 to 12 began on December 14. Individuals aged 15-19 who don’t attend a secondary school, can get immunized at a public clinic. Visit interiorhealth.ca for local clinic dates and times.

Clinics will continue over the next several weeks to ensure this population is immunized. Individuals attending a clinic to receive the vaccine should bring their care card and immunization record, if available but it is not necessary.

Q: What reduces the spread of infection?
A: Avoid sharing water bottles, cigarettes, lipstick or food with others. Individuals who show symptoms such as fever, headache, stiff neck, or vomiting should seek medical attention immediately.

Q: Where can I find more information about meningococcal disease and the Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine in BC?
A: For more information on meningococcal disease, visit HealthLink BC. If you have questions about how to obtain a vaccine, visit interiorhealth.ca.