

## MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

### WHAT IS MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE ?

- Meningococcal disease is an infection caused by a bacterial germ known as meningococcus.
- Up to 20 per cent of healthy people carry the bacteria in their throat or nose without the bacteria causing illness.
- There are 13 different types of meningococcal bacteria.

### HOW COMMON IS IT?

- The disease is rare and affects less than one in ten thousand people in NSW.
- It can occur at any age, but is mostly seen in children and young adults.

### HOW IS IT SPREAD ?

- The disease is *NOT* easily spread and is only passed on by close person-to-person contact through saliva: for example, mouth kissing, or sharing drink bottles, toothbrushes or cigarettes.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS AND HOW IS IT TREATED?

- Meningococcal infections can lead to meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain), septicaemia (blood poisoning) and other illnesses.
- Symptoms include sudden onset of fever, headache, tiredness, neck stiffness, vomiting or nausea, sore eyes sensitive to light, joint pain, and a rash.
- Symptoms are often less specific in young children and may include fever, drowsiness, vomiting, being unsettled and a rash. The rash is quite distinctive and may look like bleeding into the skin or purple-red spots. However, a rash does not always appear.

- *IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION EARLY.* Most people recover completely from meningococcal disease with early treatment with antibiotics. In a few individuals, however, the disease can be serious and life-threatening.

### WHAT ABOUT CONTACTS?

- Contacts are people who have been identified as having *VERY* close contact with a person who has the disease, such as family and household members, or those who have been exposed to the person's saliva.
- Contacts are offered a special antibiotic to kill the bacteria in the nose or throat, and therefore reduce the risk of further cases. This antibiotic does *NOT* treat the disease but simply stops the likelihood of the bacteria being carried in the nose and throat. Different antibiotics are used if symptoms develop.

### IS THERE A VACCINE?

- A vaccine is *NOT* available for all types of meningococci.
- A meningococcal vaccine is given to travellers visiting countries where specific types of meningococci frequently cause disease (for example, Africa and South America), and to persons with specific health conditions.
- Vaccines are used only in special circumstances in Australia, during outbreaks of meningococcal disease in confined environments (such as boarding schools, residential colleges or military barracks).
- The current vaccine is *NOT RECOMMENDED* in children less than two years of age.

For more information please contact your local public health unit, community health centre, or doctor. ☎