

Quick Response To Meningitis Can Save Lives

(NAPSA)—Meningitis—the mere thought of an outbreak of this life-threatening disease can cause panic in a community. However, knowing the signs and symptoms of meningitis and acting quickly to get medical attention could save your life.

Meningitis is an illness in which there is swelling of the meninges, the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. Viral or “aseptic” meningitis, which is the most common type, is caused by an infection with one of several types of viruses. In the United States, there are between 25,000 and 50,000 hospitalizations due to viral or “aseptic” meningitis each year.

“About 90 percent of the cases of viral meningitis are caused by a group of viruses known as ‘enteroviruses’ and are spread through sneezing or close contact with an infected person,” said Robert Breckenridge, M.D., FCAP of MAWD Pathology Group, Inc. in Kansas City, Mo. “While viral meningitis is serious, it is rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems.”

Bacterial meningitis—meningococcal disease—is rare and much more serious than viral meningitis. In fact, it can be life-threatening if it is not treated early. Nearly 2,600 people in the United States get bacterial meningitis each year, and about 10 to 20 percent of them die. Lack of treatment for bacterial meningitis can result in brain damage, hearing loss, learning disabilities or death.

Both types of meningitis are diagnosed by pathologists—physicians who examine fluids and tissues to diagnose diseases. They can determine through a spinal tap, also known as a lumbar puncture, whether a patient’s spinal fluid indicates meningitis.

Symptoms of Meningitis

- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Fever
- Nausea and vomiting
- Drowsy and less responsive
- Rash (that can develop anywhere on the body)



“Anyone at any age can get the disease,” said Dr. Breckenridge. “However, those at highest risk are infants; young people between the ages of 11 to 19; college students, who live in dormitories; refugees; military recruits; and people with weak immune systems.”

Some of the main symptoms of meningitis are a severe headache and stiff neck. In babies, the symptoms are not easy to identify, but may include fever, irritability, listlessness or refusal to eat.

“In many instances, the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are the same. For this reason, if you think you or your child has meningitis, you should go to a hospital emergency room immediately,” said Dr. Breckenridge. “Early diagnosis and prompt treatment can save a person’s life.”

Currently, there is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Most people fully recover on their own with bed rest, plenty of fluids and pain medication. However, those infected with bacterial meningitis need medical attention immediately and are usually treated with antibiotics.

“Exercising good personal hygiene—such as hand washing or sneezing into your sleeve rather than your hand—can help reduce your chances of becoming infected or spreading the disease,” said Dr. Breckenridge.