

What You Should Know About Meningitis

The Northvale Board of Health would like to provide Borough residents with information about meningitis. There have been two cases of meningitis in our area recently. While meningitis can be dangerous, there is no cause for alarm as meningitis is not a very contagious disease.

Meningitis is caused by the meningococcal bacterium that is found in the lining of the nose and throat. Meningococcal meningitis occurs when the bacteria gets into the blood stream. It is spread through droplets in the air from an infected individual. Direct contact with someone who is infected also spreads the disease. Direct contact is being coughed on, kissing, sharing cigarettes, drinks, lip balm or eating utensils. The disease can be spread by using anything that has touched the infected person's mouth.

The symptoms of meningococcal meningitis are a fever, body aches, confusion, exhaustion, nausea or vomiting, back and or neck stiffness, eye pain, severe headache that won't go away and a rash on the arms and legs. It is important to get medical care as soon as meningitis is suspected because the disease moves very fast. Close contacts of the infected individual will also be treated with antibiotics to prevent the disease from developing in them.

There are almost 3000 cases of meningococcal meningitis per year in the United States. 10% of those cases will die and 20% will survive the infection but will have permanent disabilities. The highest incidence of meningococcal meningitis is in infants less than one year old. However, adolescents who contract the disease are at greater risk of dying. Lifestyle factors common to adolescents put them at greater risk of contracting the disease. These factors include crowded living situations such as dormitories and sleep away camps, smoking, and irregular sleep habits.

There is a vaccine available for meningococcal meningitis. It protects against 4 out of 5 strains of the disease. There are two vaccines available. One protects for about three years, but the newer version should not need a booster shot. The vaccine is safe for people over the age of 10. Another important safeguard against meningococcal meningitis and other infections is frequent hand washing. Wash with warm soapy water for at least 10 seconds before eating, after using the bathroom, and whenever hands are dirty.

For more information visit the following websites:

National Meningitis Association www.nmaus.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov