

MENINGITIS - MENINGITE

Meningitis is an infectious disease, which attacks the meninges, the thin membranes that envelope the brain.

Meningitis can be caused by different viruses and bacteria, and among these the most important is the *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as meningococcus.

MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS

Meningococcal meningitis is transmitted from person to person through nasal-pharynx secretions. An infected person, or a carrier of the disease, can transmit the germ by coughing, sneezing, speaking or singing.

The risk of becoming infected is higher in children and decreases with age

This disease is present throughout the world, but there are areas where risk of contagion is higher, for example, in Latin America and Africa. In the later continent, the region where a devastating epidemic occurred was in the sub-Saharan region, also known as the “meningitis belt”, which spreads from Senegal to west of Sudan and eastward, passing through Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Camerun, Ciad, and the Republic of Central Africa.

HOW DOES MENINGITIS MANIFEST ITSELF?

After 2-10 days from contagion, a sudden, high fever occurs, accompanied by a severe headache, vomit, difficulty in moving the neck, agitation, or on the contrary, sluggishness until fainting occurs.

A cure must begin as soon as possible. Without rapid and efficient treatment, meningococcal meningitis can result in serious consequences or death.

HOW TO PREVENT CONTRACTING MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS

The risk of contracting meningococcal meningitis, especially during a stay in countries of the “meningitis belt”, can be reduced by avoiding over-populated living conditions, if possible, or by immunization.

2 types of vaccines are available that are useful in well defined situations, depending upon the age of the person to be immunized and, above all, upon the type of meningococcus responsible for the disease: in fact, 14 types of meningococcus germs exist. Of the two vaccines, one is capable of covering 4 types of meningococcus: A, C, Y, and W135, responsible for the greater part of the epidemic, and the other vaccine covers only type C.

Immunization is mandatory for those bound on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

In addition, it must be emphasized that if living in close contact with a person infected by meningococcal meningitis, the physician will recommend taking an antibiotic for

several days, even if immunized, since living with a person infected by this disease greatly increases the possibility of contagion.

If a trip back to your native country is planned, contact the nearest Public Health Service at least one month before departure. Additional information, along with indications concerning the benefits of immunization, will be offered.

Updated: June 2003/Aggiornato a giugno 2003

Translated by Cooperativa INTEGRA/Tradotto dalla Cooperativa INTEGRA

With the contribution of the Province of Modena/Con il contributo della Provincia di Modena

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