

WHAT KATY PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MENINGITIS

Putting a spotlight on this dangerous and potentially life-threatening disease

Written by Tonya Ellis

Dr. Ethan Brown, medical director of ER Katy, dealt with the devastating impact of meningitis in a big way about 15 years ago. “There were 40 cases in Houston,” he describes. “We saw several of those cases, and they lived because we treated them quickly. Sometimes they would lose fingertips, but that’s better than dying. People can be sick one day, and dead the next.”

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissues that surround the brain and the spinal cord. The disease causes loss of limbs, brain damage, and even death. It starts with a bacteria or virus. The bacterial-type, produced by meningococcal bacteria, is the most dangerous because it progresses so swiftly.

Common meningitis symptoms are fever, stiff neck, headache, light hurting the eyes, and a rash.

“This rash may take various forms, but for the bacterial form, it may look like red spots or bruises that don’t fade when you press them,” explains Dr. Mary Healy, director of vaccinology and maternal immunization at the Center for Vaccine Awareness and Research at Texas Children’s Hospital.

Seizures and mental confusion are also signs of meningitis. “You don’t get all the symptoms right off the bat,” adds Dr. Danny Le of Fulshear Family Medicine. “You’ll probably get a headache, and maybe even some fever, which is very vague. It will progress, usually very quickly. It can be very dangerous.”

Meningitis is contagious. Both viral and bacterial forms spread by respiratory secretions, like when you cough, sneeze, kiss, or share cups. Some forms travel through contact with the feces of a meningitis carrier.

WHO IS AT RISK

College students and military recruits are at high risk for getting meningitis because they live, eat, and go to class together. “Anywhere you have young adults that are clustered together in dorm-like conditions can be a breeding ground,” adds Dr. Le.

That’s why many colleges now require students to get vaccinated against meningitis before they enroll.

Katy’s large schools like Seven Lakes High School which has 3,800 students, for example, could be vulnerable to meningitis outbreaks, according to Dr. Le. “The high schools are basically a college, except for the dorms, with lots of exposure to different types of people. We also have a large international population, with the oil and gas companies we have located here.”

Babies, older adults, and people with weak immune systems are susceptible to meningitis as well. Preventive vaccines are given to infants; toddlers; kids ages 11, 12, and 16 years; and students heading to college.

SEEKING TREATMENT

The test for meningitis is a spinal tap to determine if the strain is from bacteria or a virus. Bacterial meningitis is treated with antibiotics and viral sufferers get supportive care, like IV fluids, to keep them comfortable, along with Motrin and Tylenol.

Be on alert with babies, since they can't tell you what's wrong. According to the National Meningitis Association, new vaccinations recommended in 2015 can help protect patients ages 16 to 23 against meningococcal serogroup B, the most common strain of the disease.

"Some symptoms and signs to look out for include, fever, or being very cold, especially at the hands or feet, baby being listless and difficult to wake up, poor feeding, funny movements, and the soft spot of the top of the head bulging out, as well as a rash," advises Dr. Healy. "Newborns also are at risk for other types of bacterial meningitis that do not affect older children and adults."

Vaccination is the best defense against meningitis, stress the doctors. "A new vaccine that prevents another type of meningococcal meningitis is available," says Dr. Healy. "This vaccine may be given to adolescents starting at age 16 to 18 if their healthcare provider decides it is right for them."

If you aren't vaccinated, feel sick, and aren't sure if you have meningitis or not, head to the doctor.

"Time is not on your side," cautions Dr. Brown. "Patients can lose limbs or fingers, become paralyzed, or have chronic neurological deficits. It could become deadly. If you think a family member has meningitis, you have to seek treatment right away." KM

TONYA ELLIS enjoys feature writing and spending time with her family.

Meningitis Warning Signs

ALERT

Think you or a family member might have meningitis? Here are the signs.

Severe Headache

High Fever

Stiff Neck

Confusion

Seizures

Purplish Rash

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