

Sunday, 14 October 2012

MENINGOCOCCAL CASE IN HUNTER HOSPITAL

A young man has been admitted to a Hunter New England District hospital with suspected meningococcal disease.

He is in a stable condition.

Doctors are prescribing clearance antibiotics to his close contacts. These antibiotics work to eradicate meningococcal bacteria that may have been the source of his infection.

If this is confirmed as meningococcal disease, it will be the seventh case in the Hunter New England Local Health District in 2012. There were 15 confirmed cases in 2011 and 14 confirmed cases both in 2010 and 2009.

"Meningococcal disease may be very severe and the community needs to be on the alert for its symptoms. If anyone suspects meningococcal disease they should seek medical attention immediately," said Public Health Physician, Dr David Durrheim.

Up to 10 per cent of patients with invasive meningococcal disease in Australia die as a result of the infection. The first symptoms of meningococcal disease may include pain in the legs, cold hands and feet and abnormal skin colour.

Later symptoms may include high fever, headache, neck stiffness, sensitivity to bright lights, nausea and vomiting, a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises and drowsiness. Babies with the infection can be irritable, not feed properly and have an abnormal cry.

"Meningococcal infection does not spread easily. It is spread by secretions from the nose and throat of a person who is carrying it and close and prolonged contact is needed to pass it on. It does not appear to be spread through saliva or by sharing drinks, food or cigarettes," Dr Durrheim said.

He stressed that while meningococcal disease could be serious, in most cases, early detection and treatment resulted in a complete recovery.

The two main strains of meningococcal disease in Australia are the B and C strains. A vaccine is effective against the less common meningococcal C strain but there is currently no Australian vaccine for the B strain of the disease. This means that young people who have had the meningococcal C vaccine should still be on the lookout for symptoms.

"The number of cases of this rare disease has been falling over the past 10 years due in part to the success of the meningococcal C vaccination program," Dr Durrheim said.

"It's also important to be aware that the vaccine does not protect against the B strain of the disease so watch out for the symptoms even if you have been vaccinated," he said.

Although people of any age can be infected, most cases of meningococcal disease are seen in infants, young children, teenagers and young adults.

The meningococcal C vaccine is recommended for all babies at 12 months of age and currently in NSW free vaccine is provided for unvaccinated people up to 25 years of age.

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