What to Know about Bacterial Meningitis

Meningitis refers to a rare but potentially fatal inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. There are several types of meningitis, and their severity and treatment can vary depending on the type. Bacterial meningitis is usually severe. While most people with meningitis recover, it can cause serious complications like brain damage, and in some circumstances, death.

What causes bacterial meningitis?
Meningitis can occur when individuals are exposed to bacteria through throat and respiratory secretions (ex., kissing, coughing, sneezing, etc.). Fortunately, most of the bacteria that cause meningitis are not as contagious as diseases like the common cold or flu.

What are the signs and symptoms?
Meningitis may show up in a person with a sudden onset of fever, headache, and/or stiff neck. Other symptoms may also be present, such as nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, extreme sleepiness, or confusion. Symptoms will typically develop within 3-7 days after exposure.

Individuals who live in communities like residence halls or houses with many roommates are at an increased risk for meningitis. People with certain diseases or taking certain medications that weaken the immune system are also at an increased risk.

When should I call a doctor?
If you have been in close contact with someone who has bacterial meningitis, consult your doctor even if you have no signs or symptoms. You may be prescribed antibiotics as a safety precaution.

If you experience symptoms of meningitis, seek medical attention right away. Early detection and treatment with appropriate antibiotics are essential to avoid serious health problems.

How can I prevent meningitis?
The most effective way to prevent meningitis is to be vaccinated. This vaccine is available through Student Health Services and is very safe. Adverse reactions are mild and infrequent, consisting primarily of redness and pain at the injection site.

Maintaining healthy habits like not smoking, avoiding cigarette smoke, getting plenty of rest, and washing your hands frequently can also help defend against bacterial meningitis and its complications.

Where do I go if I have more questions?
If you are an MTSU student and have questions about meningitis, please contact Student Health Services at 615-898-2988 or the Rutherford County Health Department at 615-898-7880.

Information compiled from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Family Physicians.