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Young Marrickville woman infected with meningococcal disease

A 24 year old woman from Marrickville is the latest victim of meningococcal disease, according to Sydney Local Health District (SLHD) Director of Public Health, Dr Stephen Conaty.

“The woman went to hospital with early symptoms, is being treated in hospital, and is improving. Family who have come in close contact with her are being followed up and referred for antibiotics,” Dr Conaty said.

“Most meningococcal disease is seen in winter although cases still occur at other times of the year, as in this situation.

“Anyone with symptoms must take action quickly, as treatment with antibiotics will lead to a complete recovery in most cases.”

Meningococcal disease can be a life-threatening condition and up to 10 per cent of cases can be fatal. The disease may result in severe complications that cause deafness and loss of limbs.

Meningococcal disease is an infection that causes meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) and severe blood infection.

The first symptoms of meningococcal disease may include pain in the legs, cold hands and feet and abnormal skin colour. Babies with the infection can be irritable, not feed properly and have an abnormal cry.

Other symptoms can include:

- high fever
- headache
- neck stiffness
- dislike of bright lights
- nausea and vomiting
- a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises
- drowsiness.

A rash of fine red spots or larger bruises is a sign that infection is progressing and that you need urgent medical attention. However, it does not always appear. Not all symptoms of meningococcal disease may be present at once.

There are several different strains of the bacteria that cause meningococcal disease and 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.

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.
The meningococcal C vaccine for children and young adults protects against only one strain of the disease, the C strain. No currently licensed vaccine protects against the more common B strain and it is important to be on alert for any symptoms, even for people who have been immunised.

“The bacteria are passed between people in the secretions from the back of the nose and throat,” Dr Conaty said.

“This generally requires close and prolonged contact with a person carrying the bacteria, for example someone living in the same household or intimate (deep) kissing.”