

MEDIA RELEASE

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Meningococcal disease: Know the symptoms

People are advised to be alert to the symptoms of meningococcal disease (including meningitis) as an outbreak in Northland continues, alongside an increase in cases in the Nelson/Tasman region this year.

Nelson Marlborough Health Medical Officer of Health Dr Andrew Lindsay says that there have been four confirmed cases of meningococcal disease in Nelson so far this year. All have been among people aged 18-35.

While the local cases are not connected, they are different strains to the Northland strain, and do not constitute an outbreak, Dr Lindsay urges people to be mindful of the disease.

“Winter and spring are typically when we experience the highest incidence of disease. It’s also the time of year when people start to travel and socialise more, in larger groups of people. While meningococcal disease can affect anyone babies, young children, teenagers and young adults living in halls of residence, flatting, or boarding dormitories are at greater risk,” Dr Lindsay says.

Meningococcal disease cases in Nelson 2018

Year	Numbers of cases	Meningococcal disease strain (serogroup)
2018 to date (the most recent case on 24 November)	4 confirmed cases	B & Y & one pending
2017	0	
2016	1	B
2015	1	B
2014	3 confirmed cases + 1 probable case	B & C

Meningococcal disease: Symptoms

Dr Lindsay says that it is critical for people to seek immediate medical attention if they, or someone they know, has symptoms of the disease. They should call an ambulance if necessary.

Meningococcal disease can be difficult to diagnose because it can look like other illnesses, such as the flu. Symptoms of meningitis can develop suddenly and include:

- a high fever
- headache
- sleepiness

- joint and muscle pains.

There can also be some more specific symptoms, such as:

- a stiff neck
- dislike of bright lights
- vomiting
- crying
- refusal to feed (in infants)
- a rash consisting of reddish-purple pin-prick spots or bruises.

Refer to the Ministry of Health website for more information about symptoms, who is most at risk, how to minimise the risk of contagion and about vaccination options:

<https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/meningococcal-disease-including-meningitis>

Details on vaccination

Vaccination against meningococcal disease is available from your GP. Your GP will be able to advise you on the recommended vaccine for you and your family and whether it is available free or for a charge.

In general the Ministry of Health recommends vaccination for:

- people who have had or are having a splenectomy (an operation to partly or completely remove the spleen)
- children with functional asplenia (when the spleen does not work properly).

It is also recommended, but not funded, for:

- young people moving to hostels, especially in their first year of university
- people with sickle cell anaemia
- people with terminal complement deficiencies
- people with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- military recruits
- microbiologists and laboratory workers who could be exposed to meningococcal bacteria
- travelers to regions where this disease is common – in particular, people participating in the hajj, and people travelling to sub-Saharan Africa (the so-called 'Meningitis Belt').

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