What Child Care Providers Should Know About…

Meningitis

What Is It?

It is a relatively rare infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by a virus, bacteria, parasite or fungus. Meningitis caused by a bacterial infection (sometimes called spinal meningitis) is one of the most serious types, occasionally leading to permanent brain damage or even death.

What Are the Symptoms?

Meningitis usually starts suddenly and includes symptoms such as fever, headache, neck pain or stiffness, vomiting (often without abdominal complaints), and irritability. These symptoms may quickly progress to decreased consciousness (difficulty in being aroused), convulsions and death. For this reason, if any child displays symptoms of possible meningitis, he or she should receive immediate medical care. Young children with meningitis show symptoms of unusual irritability, poor feeding, vomiting, fever and excessive, loud crying. Older children and adults may experience severe headache, neck pain and stiffness. If a case of meningitis occurs in your child care program, it is most important to find out what kind it is so you can alert the other parents, if necessary. You will need the cooperation of the health care provider, your health consultant and perhaps the health department.

Who Gets It and How?

Although older children and adults can get meningitis, it occurs most frequently in children under five years of age (and especially in babies one to 12 months of age). Usually germs causing meningitis are carried in the upper back part of the throat (called the nasopharynx) of an infected person. They are spread either through the air, when the person coughs or sneezes organisms into the air, or by direct contact with discharges from the nasopharynx of the infected person. However, transmission usually occurs only after very close contact with the infected person.

Some meningitis can be spread through infected feces on hands or surfaces and then ingested. The period of communicability depends upon the type of germ, and can vary from one to two weeks before symptoms begin to long after. Bacterial meningitis is generally not contagious after 24 to 48 hours of antibiotic treatment.

Meningitis and the type of germ causing it are diagnosed by health care providers performing a spinal tap and lab test. Once a diagnosis is made, it should be communicated to you by the health care provider as soon as possible, along with appropriate instructions about what to tell other parents.

When Should People with this Illness Be Excluded?

People with meningitis generally feel too ill to attend child care. They can return when they feel better with no fever, or when the health care provider determines the disease is no longer contagious.

Where Should I Report It?

- Licensing requires that child care providers report to their local health department and to Licensing if there are two or more known or suspected cases of meningitis in a child care program. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends that child care providers report even if there is only a single case, to ensure that the local Public Health Department is aware that this serious illness is present in a child care setting.
- Notify all parents/guardians and program staff if there is even one case. It is important that parents monitor their children for any symptoms. Keep the identity of any infected childrent confidential.

How Can I Limit the Spread of Meningitis?

Meningitis caused by Hemophilus influenza serotype b (Hib) can be prevented with Hib vaccine, which is part of routine childhood immunizations. Some cases of meningococcal meningitis can also be prevented by vaccine. However, this vaccine is not used routinely, and usually only during outbreaks or in high-risk children.

The best ways to prevent the spread of meningitis are to:

- Always practice good hand washing and environmental sanitation.
- Assure that all children (and staff) are appropriately immunized, especially with the Hib vaccine.
- Communicate with the health department to determine how the specific disease should be managed as well as share information with the child's parent, other parents, the child's health care provider and your own health consultant.