

Free meningococcal ACWY vaccine for all young people in Tasmania

2018



Frequently Asked Questions

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a rare but very serious infection that can be fatal.

People with meningococcal disease can go from feeling well to extremely unwell very quickly.

Symptoms include fever, severe aches and pains, headache, drowsiness and confusion. Infants can be distressed, limp, pale and feed poorly.

If you (or your child) have seen a doctor but you get worse, go back to your doctor or emergency department. Don't wait.

Are there different strains of meningococcal disease?

There is one kind of bacteria that causes meningococcal disease, however the bacteria can be divided into different strains. These strains are named with different letters of the alphabet.

The most common strains of meningococcal disease in Tasmania are A, C, W, Y and B.

Understanding that there are different strains of meningococcal disease is important because different vaccines only provide protection for specific strains. For example, the meningococcal ACWY (MenACWY) vaccine only protects against the strains A, C, W and Y. The meningococcal B (MenB) vaccine only protects against the strain B.

How common is meningococcal disease?

Tasmania typically has about six cases of meningococcal disease a year.

In 2018 there were no meningococcal disease cases in the first six months. There have been nine cases since July. Seven cases in the South, one case in the North and one case in the North-West.

Five of the seven cases were meningococcal W. Three of the W cases were from the Hobart suburbs of New Town, Moonah and Glenorchy. There have been three cases of meningococcal B (one case in the South, one case in the North and one case in the North-West). There has been one case of meningococcal Y.

Why is the current meningococcal immunisation program focusing on the W strain?

The current meningococcal W strain is considered 'severe' because it can spread more quickly in the community and has a higher mortality rate than many other strains. The first meningococcal disease case in Tasmania due to the current 'severe' meningococcal W strain occurred in 2015. Since then the W strain has caused more than half of all meningococcal cases, and the number of cases due to the W strain has increased each year.

How can I stay safe?

The best protection is immunisation.

We are offering free MenACWY vaccine to Tasmanians born after 1 August 1997, and at least 6 weeks old. This vaccine will protect immunised Tasmanians against meningococcal A, C, W and Y strains for the next four or so years.

Where can I get the free vaccine?

You can get the free Men W vaccine from:

- your GP
- some council-run clinics
- some pharmacies (only for people aged 10–21 years).

I might be pregnant. Should I have the vaccine?

No. If you think you might be pregnant you should **not** receive the Men W vaccine as part of this program. Please discuss this with your doctor.

Why is the free vaccine limited to this age group?

Infants, children and young people are at higher risk of catching meningococcal disease.

Teenagers are more likely to carry meningococcal bacteria in their throat or nose and spread the bacteria to others. Immunising this group of Tasmanians will protect them and help reduce the spread of the disease in the general population.

Is this vaccine different to the meningococcal vaccine my teenager had at school?

If your child was born between 1 August 1997 and 30 April 2003, they may have received the MenACWY vaccine through the school-based meningococcal immunisation program in late 2017 or early 2018. If you know they received that vaccine, they do not need to be immunised again.

If your teenager did **not** get the MenACWY vaccine from school in late 2017 or early 2018, it's important they get the free vaccine now.

My one-year-old got a free meningococcal vaccine. Is this the same?

Children who turned one **before 1 July 2018** will have received a meningococcal C vaccine (combined with Hib) through the routine immunisation program. This vaccine provided protection against just the C strain. It's important they receive the free four-strain Men W vaccine now.

Children who turned one **on or after 1 July 2018**, will have received a meningococcal ACWY (Men W) vaccine through the routine immunisation program. They do not need a second Men W vaccine.

How many doses do you need?

Infants under 12 months need two or three doses (depending on their age) of the Men W vaccine, over a period of time.

Children with impaired immunity need an extra dose of the vaccine.

Most people only need one dose.

Ask your vaccine provider (doctor, nurse or pharmacist).

Will there continue to be more cases of meningococcal disease?

The state-wide Meningococcal ACWY Immunisation Program aims to reduce the number of meningococcal disease cases in Tasmania. We may still see some cases of meningococcal disease in Tasmania for the following reasons:

The vaccine reduces the number of people who are carrying the meningococcal bacterium and reduces its spread other people. It will take time for the vaccination program to have its full effect on the community.

While it can occur at any time, meningococcal disease is more common in winter and spring.

There are other (less common) strains of meningococcal bacteria that cannot be prevented by a vaccine. The vaccination program will not stop these cases from occurring.

Why isn't there a free vaccine for the meningococcal B strain?

For now, the most important thing is to protect people against the W strain of meningococcal disease. The W strain has caused five recent cases in Tasmania and more than half of all cases since 2015.

If you would like to protect yourself or your family from meningococcal B, you can talk to your doctor about meningococcal B immunisation. MenB vaccine is available on private prescription at a cost.

I've already paid for a meningococcal ACWY vaccine. Can I get a refund?

No. Funding is not available for reimbursement.

Is immunisation compulsory?

You can choose not to get immunised, but we recommend every Tasmanian resident born after 1 August 1997 and at least 6-weeks-old gets immunised to protect themselves and help prevent the spread of meningococcal disease within our community.

Meningococcal disease is serious. Immunisation is the best protection.

Other than age, are there risk factors for catching meningococcal disease?

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Meningococcal disease is serious. Immunisation is the best protection.

What should I do if I think I or someone I care for has meningococcal disease?

Seek emergency medical treatment immediately.

Call your GP, HealthDirect (available 24 hours, phone 1800 022 222) or go to an Emergency Department

Where can I find more information about meningococcal disease and immunisation?

Meningococcal Disease:

- DHHS Meningococcal Disease Fact Sheet:
www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable_diseases_prevention_unit/infectious_diseases/meningococcal_disease
- Australian Government Department of Health – Meningococcal W Disease:
www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-meningococcal-W.htm

Meningococcal Vaccines:

- The Australian Immunisation Handbook – Meningococcal Disease:
www.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook10-home~handbook10part4~handbook10-4-10
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance- Meningococcal Vaccines Fact Sheet: www.ncirs.edu.au/assets/provider_resources/fact-sheets/meningococcal-vaccines-fact-sheet.pdf

Tasmanian Meningococcal W Program:

- www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/menw