

## **Meningococci**

### **What are meningococci?**

Meningococci are bacteria that temporarily colonise the human nose and throat region without necessarily entailing any disease. Colonisation by various types of meningococci entails natural immunity. Meningococcal diseases are extremely rare. In Austria, one case is registered per 100,000 inhabitants and year. Meningococci are divided into 12 serogroups. Serogroups B and C are those that occur most frequently in Austria.

### **How is the disease transmitted?**

Meningococci quickly die off outside the human body; for this reason, they are transmitted exclusively from person to person by way of droplets (coughing, sneezing) or saliva. They are not transmitted by water and other foods. Up to 40% of all meningococcal diseases occur in children aged under 5 years, as their immune system is not yet fully developed. The second group at risk with an incidence of around 20% of all cases are young people aged between 14 and 19 years. Meningococcal diseases mainly occur during the cooler months, i.e. in the period of head colds and influenza.

### **How can you protect yourself against meningococci?**

Vaccination against meningococci of certain serogroups is possible.

### **What are the symptoms of the disease?**

Meningococci can cause septicaemia (blood poisoning) and meningitis (inflammation of the meninges). After 2 to 10 days following infection, symptoms such as headache, neck stiffness, pain in the joints and muscles, cramps, vomiting, the inability to tolerate bright light (“photophobia”), dizziness, quickly rising fever, chills and shivering may occur, both individually and as a combination thereof. Typically, the disease is accompanied by small, red spots on the skin. The symptoms are usually less characteristic in babies and toddlers and comprise fever, loss of appetite or vomiting, shrill crying or wailing, anxiety, touch sensitivity, neck stiffness and a rigid facial expression. The typical spots on the skin usually occur in children as well. In rare cases when the disease takes a particularly severe course, it may be lethal within the period of only one day.

### **What other aspects should be observed?**

Meningococcal diseases require the immediate administration of antibiotics. If an infection is suspected, a physician should therefore be consulted as promptly as possible. It is also recommended to treat relatives and persons maintaining close contact with meningococcal patients with antibiotics. This preventive measure should be taken as early as possible. Other persons exposed to infected individuals, such as e.g. classmates or colleagues at the workplace, normally run a very low risk of contracting the disease; thus the preventive administration of antibiotics is not absolutely recommended.