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Parents and young people urged to know the symptoms of meningococcal disease

Hunter New England Local Health District is urging parents and young people to know the symptoms and act fast if they suspect meningococcal disease to help prevent premature death or life-long disability.

As we head into late winter and early spring, infections tend to increase, and risk is greatest for children under five and for 15-24-year-olds.

Last year, there were 59 meningococcal cases in NSW. There have been seven cases of invasive meningococcal disease so far this year in the Hunter New England region.

Symptoms usually start with a sudden fever, often with headache, nausea and drowsiness. Neck stiffness, dislike of bright lights and a rash of reddish-purple spots or bruises may also develop quickly. Babies with the infection may be irritable, not feed properly or have an abnormal cry.

If meningococcal disease is suspected, don't wait for the rash but see a doctor urgently. While a rash is a well-known symptom of meningococcal disease, it does not always occur or may present late in the illness.

Seeking medical help urgently can be lifesaving because meningococcal disease can be fatal in up to one in 10 cases.

One in five infections result in permanent disabilities, including learning difficulties, sight and hearing problems, liver and kidney failure, loss of fingers, toes and limbs, or scarring caused by skin grafts.

Vaccination is strongly encouraged as a key prevention measure. Under the National Immunisation Program, meningococcal ACWY (Men ACWY) vaccine is provided free for babies at 12 months, adolescents, and people of all ages with certain medical conditions. In NSW, the adolescent dose is delivered through the school vaccination program in Year 10.

As of 1 July 2020, Aboriginal children up to the age of two years, and people with certain medical conditions, can also access free meningococcal B (Men B) vaccine.

NSW Health is investing approximately \$140 million in its vaccination program in 2020-21.

For more information on vaccination please visit the NSW Health website. For information on symptoms, transmission, risks and treatment, see the NSW Health website.