

# Media Release

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## Be alert to the signs and symptoms of meningococcal

Hunter New England Health is urging the community to be alert to the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been six cases of invasive meningococcal so far this year in the Hunter New England region, which includes a baby under 12-months-of-age who was recently diagnosed with the disease in the Greater Newcastle area.

The child is in a stable condition and is now recovering at home. The child's close contacts are being treated with clearance antibiotics.

Public health physician, Dr Tony Merritt said it is important the community is aware of the signs and symptoms of meningococcal infection.

"Meningococcal disease can occur at any time of year, but we typically see a peak in cases in spring following the winter flu season. Most cases occur in infants, young children, teenagers and young adults, although people of any age can be affected," said Dr Merritt.

Meningococcal infection does not spread easily. It is spread by secretions from the nose and throat of a person who is carrying the bacteria and close and prolonged contact is needed to pass it on.

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

The National Immunisation Program includes a combined vaccination for meningococcal A, C, W and Y disease at the age of 12 months. The Meningococcal B vaccination is also now available free for Aboriginal children under two years of age and is given free to Aboriginal children on the routine childhood immunisation schedule at six weeks, four months and twelve months of age.

In addition, the NSW Government funded meningococcal ACWY vaccine for older adolescents in schools from 2017 in response to an increase in cases of meningococcal W. Since 2019 this vaccine has been provided free under the National Immunisation Program.

People aged 15-19 years who have not received the ACWY vaccine via the school program can visit their general practitioner to receive a free vaccine.

The NSW Government invested \$17 million in the Meningococcal W Response Program and over 200,000 teenagers were vaccinated with the ACWY vaccine in the first two years of the program.