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Meningococcal disease on the rise this season

NSW Minister for Health, John Della Bosca, today reminded the community to be on the look out for the signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease following a 100 per cent jump in notifications so far this year.

"I urge all young people, especially those up to the age of 25 and parents of young children aged one year and older to double check they have received the meningococcal C vaccine that protects against one of the strains of this serious disease," Mr Della Bosca said.

"Although it's rare, meningococcal disease is serious and up to 10 per cent of patients can die.

"Typically we see a trend in meningococcal disease that peaks in the winter and early spring months," he said.

"A total of 80 cases of meningococcal disease were notified to NSW Health in 2008.

"Alarmingly, between January and May this year there have been 28 cases of the disease, compared to 14 cases over the same period in 2008 – that is a jump of 100 per cent.

"Early identification and treatment of the disease is vital. It is important to remind the community, particularly parents, GPs and emergency department staff, to remain alert to the signs and symptoms of this potentially deadly disease," Mr Della Bosca said.

Dr Jeremy McAnulty, Director Communicable Disease Branch for NSW Health, said the first symptoms of meningococcal disease can sometimes be vague and may include pain in the legs, cold hands and feet and abnormal skin colour.

The classic symptoms include:

- a blotchy purple-red rash
- high fever
- headache
- neck stiffness
- dislike of bright lights
- nausea and vomiting
- drowsiness.

"All these symptoms may not be present, and the rash does not always develop," Dr McAnulty said.

"Babies with the infection can be irritable, very hot, may not feed properly and they may have an abnormal cry," he said.

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He said the two main strains of meningococcal disease diagnosed in NSW are B and C.

“An effective vaccine is available against the less common meningococcal C strain, but there is currently no vaccine available for the B strain of the disease in Australia,” Dr McAnulty said.

“This means that young people who have had the meningococcal C vaccine should still be on the look out for symptoms.

“The number of cases of this rare disease have been falling over the past 10 years, due in part to the success of the meningococcal C vaccination program and also increasing awareness in the community.

“Notifications of meningococcal C disease have fallen from 26 per cent of the yearly total in 2000 to 11 per cent in 2008.

“Early detection and treatment can, in the majority of cases, result in full recovery.

“The meningococcal C vaccine is recommended for all babies at 12 months of age and currently in NSW, free vaccine is provided by NSW Health for unvaccinated people up to 25 years of age.

“Where meningococcal disease has been diagnosed, public health officials will arrange for information and clearance antibiotics to be provided to close contacts, like the other members of the person’s household.

“The purpose of clearance antibiotics is to eradicate any meningococcus the contacts may be carrying to prevent further transmission of the disease.

“Clearance antibiotics will not necessarily prevent the disease so all contacts of a patient should seek urgent medical attention should symptoms occur,” Dr McAnulty added.