Streptococcal infections: important information

NHS Borders

What's a Streptococcal infection?

These infections are caused by several strains of bacteria - the most common are streptococcus A and streptococcus B.

Most group A streptococcal bacteria cause skin and throat infections, including:
- strep throat (sore throat)
- impetigo (infection of the skin producing pus-filled blisters)
- cellulitis (infection of the skin, fat and underlying tissues)
- erysipelas (inflammation of the upper layers of the skin)
- tonsillitis (severe throat infection)
- scarlet fever (infection causing sore throat, fever and rash)

Group A streptococcal bacteria can get into the blood, deep muscle or fat tissue and cause what are known as invasive streptococcal infections, including:
- bacteraemia (blood infection)
- endocarditis (heart lining infection)
- meningitis (brain and spinal cord inflammation)
- peritonitis (intestinal inflammation)
- urinary tract infection
- necrotising fasciitis (death of tissue under the skin)
- streptococcal toxic shock syndrome (infection causing low blood pressure and injury to organs such as the kidneys, liver and lungs)

Group B streptococcal bacteria usually cause infections in newborn babies, such as lung infection, blood poisoning and meningitis.

Some people are carriers of streptococcal bacteria on their skin or in their throat, vagina, bladder or rectum. Carriers do not develop an infection.

What are the symptoms?

Streptococcal bacteria cause a wide range of infections. Each infection produces different symptoms.

Symptoms of the most common streptococcal infection - strep throat - include:
- sore, red throat
- fever, headache
- swollen lymph nodes (lumps) in the neck and under the jaw

Although necrotising fasciitis is rare, it can be particularly serious. The early symptoms of necrotising fasciitis and other severe invasive streptococcal infections often include several of the following combined:
- minor cut or injury to the skin that usually appears infected
- pain in the general area of the injury
- pain that is more severe than would be normal with a minor cut or injury
- flu-like symptoms, such as diarrhoea, nausea, fever, confusion, dizziness and weakness
- intense thirst

If you experience several of these symptoms at once, you should seek quick medical attention.

How is it passed on?

Streptococcal bacteria are spread by person-to-person contact with someone with an infection or less likely a carrier.

Streptococcal bacteria can also spread in droplets from the nose or throat of someone with an infection.

Occasionally, streptococcal bacteria can enter the body in food contaminated with the bacteria - usually milk and milk products, and eggs.

Invasive streptococcal infections develop when bacteria get past the body's natural defences such as a break in the skin. Health conditions that reduce immunity to infection make invasive infections more likely, so people with chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes and kidney disease, and those who use medications such as steroids, are at greater risk.

The spread of bacteria can be reduced by good hand washing, especially after coughing and sneezing, before preparing foods and before eating.

Cuts, grazes and other wounds should be kept clean and watched for signs of infection, including swelling, redness, pus and pain in the area of the wound. If you see any of these signs, you should visit your GP.

How should they be managed?

Streptococcal infections are diagnosed by testing a swab from the throat, or by a blood or urine test. In all three cases, the test checks for the presence of streptococcal bacteria.

Infections are treated with antibiotics. Invasive streptococcal infections may need antibiotics to be given intravenously (directly into a vein).

Invasive infections that affect soft tissue, bone or muscle may require surgery. Early treatment improves the outlook greatly, but some invasive streptococcal infections and some group B streptococcal infections of newborn babies can be fatal.

All strains of streptococcal bacteria can cause complications such as rheumatic fever (infection affecting the heart and joints) and glomerulonephritis (kidney inflammation).

Sometimes Public Health will advise that close contacts of people with streptococcal infection are given antibiotics.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform   www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111   www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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