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MENINGOCOCCAL CASES COULD RISE WITH SHIFTING SEASONS

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District (SESLHD) is urging people to be alert to lesser known signs of meningococcal disease with two cases already reported in the area this year and the peak period for the disease still more than a month away.

Professor Mark Ferson, Director, SESLHD Public Health Unit, said meningococcal disease can occur at any time of year but cases normally start to increase towards the end of flu season when people's immune systems are weaker from viruses.

"Last year SESLHD reported 10 cases of meningococcal disease. It is a rare but serious bacterial infection that can cause death within hours so the more symptoms people know about, the better," said Professor Ferson.

"Most cases occur in infants, young children, teenagers and young adults, although people of any age can be affected."

NSW Health's Director of Communicable Diseases, Dr Vicky Sheppard said meningococcal can often mimic other common illnesses, so it is important people be aware nearer spring that nausea symptoms, vomiting, neck stiffness, joint pain, light sensitivity, or a sudden fever, could be something else.

"Most people normally associate meningococcal disease with a rash of red-purple spots or bruises but in some cases a rash doesn't appear, or it could be the last symptom to take shape," said Dr Sheppard.

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

"It more commonly occurs in people aged between 15-24 years as they tend to be involved in more intimate social activities such as kissing," said Dr Sheppard.

Vaccination is the best means of protection against meningococcal disease. Vaccination for meningococcal disease types A, C, W and Y, is available on the National Immunisation Program for infants at 12 months of age and adolescents in Year 10.

Any adolescents aged 15 to 19 years who miss the vaccine in school are eligible for a free vaccine from their GP. However, as there are several strains of meningococcal disease, and vaccination does not cover all strains, even vaccinated people need to be on the lookout for symptoms.

The latest Annual Immunisation Report shows vaccination rates in NSW are at their highest level ever, with close to 95 per cent of five year olds fully vaccinated.

The NSW Government will invest around \$130 million in the 2019-20 Immunisation Program Budget, including Commonwealth and State vaccines.