

GROUP A STREPTOCOCCAL (GAS) DISEASE

What is Group A Streptococcus?

Group A Streptococcus (Group A Strep or GAS) is a common bacteria that can cause a variety of infections ranging from no illness to severe illness. The most frequent conditions include: sore throats (commonly referred to as strep throat), ear infections, skin infections and scarlet fever.

How common is Group A Strep bacteria in the general population?

Group A Strep is commonly found in the nose and throat of about 5-30% of healthy children and 1% of adults. It can be carried in the throat or skin of healthy people who show no signs or symptoms of illness.

How is Group A Strep spread?

Group A Strep is spread through direct contact with the nose or mouth secretions of an infected person, for example, through open mouth kissing, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or through direct contact with infected sores on the skin.

Can Group A Strep infections be serious?

In rare cases, the same strep bacteria can cause a severe form of illness called **invasive GAS disease**. This happens when bacteria get into parts of the body where the bacteria are not usually found such as the blood, muscle or the lungs. The most severe forms of invasive GAS disease can cause very serious illness and may even lead to death.

How common is Invasive GAS disease?

In Ontario, every year, approximately 2-3 people out of every 100,000 have an invasive GAS infection. This is much less than the thousands of people who experience non-invasive infections such as strep throat each year.

Who is most at risk for Invasive GAS disease?

Few people who come in contact with Group A Strep develop severe invasive disease; most will have a routine throat or skin infection. Although healthy people can get invasive disease, people with chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes and kidney dialysis, and those who use medications such as steroids, are at higher risk. Breaks in the skin, like cuts, surgical wounds or chickenpox may also provide an opportunity for the bacteria to enter the body.

What are the signs and symptoms of Invasive GAS disease?

A person with this serious form of Group A Strep infection can become very ill within 12 – 24 hours. There can be a history of flu-like symptoms such as fever, pain and muscle ache before signs of infection or rash quickly develop. In other cases there may be severe pain, swelling, redness or swollen lymph nodes associated with a recent cut or injury.

What precautions can be taken to prevent Invasive GAS disease?

- Use good personal hygiene, especially frequent and thorough hand washing
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue or upper sleeve
- Wounds and cuts should be well cleansed, disinfected and bandaged
- Report any sudden or unusual signs of infection, sore throat and/or fever to your doctor

What is the role of Peel Public Health?

Peel Public Health investigates reports of communicable diseases including Invasive GAS disease. Our role is to identify, notify close contacts of an infected person and assess the need for preventive antibiotics. Contacts are advised to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of GAS infection and/or fever for 30 days.

For further information, talk to your doctor or call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.