Interim UK guidelines for management of close community contacts of invasive group A streptococcal disease

Health Protection Agency, Group A Streptococcus Working Group

Summary: Group A streptococci cause a wide range of illnesses from non-invasive disease such as pharyngitis to more severe invasive infections such as necrotising fasciitis. There remains uncertainty about the risk of invasive disease among close contacts of an index case of invasive disease and whether this risk warrants antibiotic prophylaxis. A 19-200 fold increased risk among household contacts has been reported in the literature. Recommendations for antibiotic prophylaxis regimens vary by country.

A comprehensive literature review together with preliminary analysis of 2003 United Kingdom data from the strep-EURO programme informed the interim recommendations of an expert working group. The evidence base to formulate definitive guidance is weak. Risk calculations based on provisional UK data estimated that over 2,000 contacts would need to receive antibiotic prophylaxis to prevent a subsequent case of invasive group A streptococcal disease. The Working Group considered that currently available evidence did not warrant the routine administration of chemoprophylaxis to all close community contacts. More robust risk estimates will be derived from ongoing UK surveillance data to inform a review of this guidance in 2005.

Key words: group A streptococci contacts guidance


Contents

Summary 354
Introduction 355
Definitions 355
Epidemiology of iGAS 355
Carriage and transmission 355
Risk factors for iGAS 355
Risk to household contacts 356
Background to guidance 356
Effectiveness of antibiotic prophylaxis 356
Objective of guidance 356
Working group 356
Public health action after a community-acquired case 356
Aim of chemoprophylaxis 356
Chemoprophylaxis 356
Definition of a close community contact 356
Options for chemoprophylaxis 357
Reporting of invasive isolate 357

Recommended antibiotic regimen 358
Special situations 358
Nursing homes 358
Injecting drug users 358
Clusters 359
Household clusters 359
Clusters in the wider community 359
Risk communication 359
Review date 359
Acknowledgements 359
References 359

Boxed items:

Key recommendations 355
Table 1 Spectrum of invasive group A streptococcal disease 355
Table 2 Levels of evidence 356
Table 3 Grades of recommendation 357
Table 4 Recommended chemoprophylaxis regimens 358
Table 5 Targeted versus mass antibiotic prophylaxis in nursing homes 358
Single case in a nursing home 359
Outbreak control team — initial actions 359
Appendix 1 Members of Working Group 361
Appendix 2 Contact details 361

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People at increased risk for sporadic iGAS include those aged over 65 years of age; those who have recently been infected with varicella virus; those with HIV infection, diabetes, heart disease or cancer; and those using high-dose steroids or intravenous drugs.

Evidence Level Range 2+ to 3

Diagnosis Characteristics

Streptococcal toxic shock syndrome Shock and multi-organ system failure
Necrotising fasciitis Extensive local necrosis of subcutaneous soft tissues and skin
Other invasive disease Bacteraemia with/without identified focus of infection

People at increased risk for sporadic iGAS include those aged over 65 years of age; those who have recently been infected with varicella virus; those with HIV infection, diabetes, heart disease or cancer; and those using high-dose steroids or intravenous drugs.

Evidence Level Range 2+ to 3

TABLE 1  Spectrum of invasive group A streptococcal disease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Streptococcal toxic shock syndrome</td>
<td>Shock and multi-organ system failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necrotising fasciitis</td>
<td>Extensive local necrosis of subcutaneous soft tissues and skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other invasive disease</td>
<td>Bacteraemia with/without identified focus of infection</td>
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</table>
Risk to household contacts

Estimates of risk of subsequent iGAS are uncertain because of the small number of documented ‘index case-subsequent case’ pairs (n = 5) in two studies that have attempted to quantify this risk. All five subsequent cases occurred among adults who were immediate family members and all five occurred within three weeks of the index case’s date of culture. The increased risk in household members may be due to a combination of genetic susceptibility in the family, close contact with carriers in the family and the virulence of the particular GAS strain involved.

In a follow up study of clusters identified from strep-EURO data in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland during 2003, five household clusters were identified, two wife-husband pairs and three mother-neonate pairs (I Oliver, 2004; unpublished data). Infections in the neonatal period (first 28 days of life) were therefore considered as having a high risk of further cases in the mother or baby. Risk estimates for other household settings suggested that over 2,000 close contacts would need treatment to prevent a case, even assuming 100% effectiveness of chemoprophylaxis.

Background to guidance

Public health policies on the management of contacts of iGAS vary between countries. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend, when chemoprophylaxis has been decided upon, a choice of benzathine penicillin G (one dose by injection) and rifampicin (four days), clindamycin (10 days) or azithromycin (five days) to households where at least one contact is in a high-risk group. Health Canada recommends a 10-day course of cephalosporin, erythromycin or penicillin V to all close contacts. The UK and other European countries do not have published guidelines. A postal questionnaire survey of consultants in communicable disease control (CCDCs) was undertaken in England in 2004. There was an 84% response rate from health protection units and it showed that most did not have a local policy for the management of community contacts of sporadic cases (I Oliver, 2004; unpublished data).

Effectiveness of antibiotic prophylaxis

No clinical trials have evaluated the effectiveness of chemoprophylaxis in preventing iGAS among household contacts of a case. However there are a number of trials that have successfully shown the effectiveness of antimicrobial agents for the eradication of GAS from the upper respiratory tract. It is these studies that have formed the basis of Canadian and American recommendations of antimicrobial regimens for the management of contacts of cases of iGAS. The effectiveness of these policies on preventing iGAS is not known.

Objective of guidance

The objective of these guidelines is to present the rationale and recommendations for the public health management of close community contacts of cases of iGAS in the UK. Guidance for hospital settings is not included.

Working group

The Working Group comprised representatives from the Health Protection Agency, the Public Health Medicine Environmental Group, the Infection Control Nurses Association (ICNA) and the Association of Medical Microbiologists.

The Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN) system was used to evaluate the levels of evidence. An evidence level was assigned (Table 2). A grade of recommendation was then agreed as the considered judgement of the Working Group based on the volume, consistency and generalisability etc. of the evidence (table 3).

Public health action after a community-acquired case

Aim of chemoprophylaxis

Chemoprophylaxis aims to reduce the risk of invasive disease by eradicating carriage of GAS in those contacts at highest risk. It may act in two ways namely: (1) eradicating carriage from established carriers who pose a risk of infection to others, and (2) eradicating carriage in those who have newly acquired the invasive strain and who may themselves be at risk.

Chemoprophylaxis

Definition of a close community contact

Although the risk to contacts is low the highest documented risk is to people who live in the same household. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2 Levels of evidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1++</td>
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<td>1+</td>
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<td>2++</td>
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<td>2+</td>
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<td>2-</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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</table>
household. For pragmatic reasons, the Working Group took the view that close contacts should be defined as for the public health management of meningococcal disease in the UK.

Options for chemoprophylaxis
The working group considered a number of options for prophylaxis:

A. Giving antibiotic prophylaxis to:
   1. All close contacts of a case (as in Canada).
   2. Only to high risk contacts.
   3. All close contacts if at least one contact is at high risk (as in US).
   4. Close contacts who had a positive throat culture.

B. Not giving any prophylaxis but raising awareness of risk.

The following points were considered in reaching a recommendation.
- Antibiotics have potential undesirable side effects (adverse drug reactions, contributing to the development of drug-resistant organisms, changing the normal human body flora).
- The risk of iGAS among household contacts is higher than the risk to the general population, but the risk is low and not accurately quantified.
- The sensitivity of throat swab in detection of carriage is not known. Transmission of GAS may occur between close contacts in the interval between taking a swab and administering antibiotics if positive. Similarly, preventable cases may occur in this same interval.
- Administering antibiotics to high-risk contacts alone does not remove the risk of acquisition from other asymptomatic carriers.
- The identification and administration of antibiotics to all close contacts is undoubtedly a logistical challenge.
- Risk estimates for household settings suggested that over 2,000 close contacts would need treatment to prevent a case, even assuming 100% effectiveness of chemoprophylaxis (I Oliver, 2004; unpublished data).

In light of these considerations the Group came to a view that prophylaxis should not be routinely recommended to close contacts with the exception of cases in mother or baby during the neonatal period, or if individuals have symptoms consistent with localised GAS infection*. A heightened index of suspicion for iGAS in close contacts should be maintained for 30 days after the diagnosis is made in the index patient.

TABLE 3 Grades of recommendation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>At least one meta-analysis, systematic review, or RCT rated as 1++ and directly applicable to the target population or systematic review of RCTs or a body of evidence consisting principally of studies rated as 1+ directly applicable to the target population and demonstrating overall consistency of results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>A body of evidence including studies rated as 2++ directly applicable to the target population and demonstrating overall consistency of results or extrapolated evidence from studies rated as 1++ or 1+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>A body of evidence including studies rated as 2+ directly applicable to the target population and demonstrating overall consistency of results or extrapolated evidence from studies rated as 2++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Evidence level 3 or 4 or extrapolated evidence from studies rated as 2+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A close contact is defined as a person who has had prolonged close contact with the case in a household-type setting during the seven days before onset of illness.

Evidence Level Range 2+

Antibiotics should only be administered: (1) to mother and baby if either develops invasive group A streptococcal disease in the neonatal period (first 28 days of life); (2) to close contacts if they have symptoms suggestive of localised group A streptococcal infection i.e. sore throat, fever, skin infection.

If contacts have symptoms suggestive of invasive disease, e.g. high fever, severe muscle aches, or localised muscle tenderness, then they should be immediately referred to A&E for emergency assessment.

Other close contacts should (1) receive a GAS information leaflet outlining the signs and symptoms of iGAS disease, and (2) be advised to seek immediate medical attention if they develop such symptoms.

Additional measures to consider in circumstances involving more than one linked patient are described under special situations in section 5.

Reporting of invasive isolate
To facilitate the identification of contacts of index cases all suspected cases of invasive GAS disease should be reported to the relevant CCDC or consultant in public health. Isolates from invasive GAS infections should be

*iGAS information leaflet for contacts available at www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/strepto/gen_info.htm
Recommended antibiotic regimen

The Working Group has recommended an antibiotic prophylaxis regimen utilising a number of criteria to assist the process: (1) limitations (including applicability) of evidence from trials showing effectiveness of antimicrobial agents in eradication of GAS from the upper respiratory tract, (2) minimising undesirable side effects, (3) minimising selection for resistant organisms, (4) maximising compliance, and (5) maximising cost effectiveness.

Penicillin has been the drug of choice to prevent acute rheumatic fever following GAS pharyngitis for over 50 years. It is among the best tolerated and safest antimicrobial agents. The cost of oral penicillin V is substantially below that of alternative agents. GAS strains have remained consistently penicillin susceptible. As yet, to our knowledge, there have been no published reports of penicillin-resistant clinical isolates of GAS.

Azithromycin is suitable for those who are allergic to penicillin and where the index case isolate is azithromycin sensitive. If azithromycin is used for prophylaxis then susceptibility to erythromycin/azithromycin in the index case isolate should be confirmed and changed if resistant. Currently (2003) approximately 3%-4% of iGAS isolates are resistant to these agents so susceptibility is likely but must not be assumed. Azithromycin is active against Group A streptococci and is not subject to degradation by beta-lactamase. Total drug exposure after a single daily dose for five days is comparable with that achieved after 10 days of treatment with shorter acting agents. Comparative clinical trials involving azithromycin have demonstrated higher clinical and bacteriological response rates to those achieved with oral penicillin V. Azithromycin is associated with a higher incidence of gastrointestinal complaints than penicillin V but rates of drug discontinuation from such side effects were lower. Azithromycin is preferable to erythromycin because of its spectrum of action, shorter course and fewer gastrointestinal side effects.

Table 4: Recommended chemoprophylaxis regimens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>Dose</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PenicillinV</td>
<td>250-500mg QID</td>
<td>10 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Azithromycin</td>
<td>12mg/kg/day p.o. in a single dose (max daily dose, 500mg/day)</td>
<td>5 days</td>
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</table>

Table 5: Targeted versus mass antibiotic prophylaxis in nursing homes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted antibiotic prophylaxis</th>
<th>Mass antibiotic prophylaxis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limits antibiotic exposure in residents</td>
<td>Could contribute to development of antibiotic resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures may be false negative</td>
<td>Should eradicate all carriage in residents and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could miss transmission by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Transient carriage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- False negatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Contaminated fomites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visiting family members</td>
<td>Could miss transmission by:</td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Neither approach can compensate for poor infection control practices.

**Special situations**

**Nursing homes**

Nursing home residents account for approximately 4% of all cases. Outbreaks of GAS infection in nursing homes have been reported. Prevention of the spread of GAS is especially important because of the high mortality rate in this population. Approaches to consider include targeting antibiotic treatment only to those residents and staff who are GAS carriers, or antibiotic treatment of all residents and staff irrespective of GAS colonisation.

**Injecting drug users**

Injecting drug users are at increased risk of sporadic iGAS. Cases of iGAS presenting in hostels providing temporary accommodation for the homeless, can represent a challenge for health teams. In such settings...
Single case in a nursing home
Nursing homes should review infection control measures and maintain a heightened index of suspicion for 30 days. Close contacts among residents (sharing same room/side ward) and staff should only receive chemoprophylaxis if (a) they have symptoms suggestive of localised Group A streptococcal infection i.e. sore throat, fever, skin infection and (b) a viral URTI has been excluded as the more likely diagnosis.

GRADE D

If close contacts have symptoms suggestive of invasive disease, e.g. high fever, severe muscle aches, localised muscle tenderness, and a viral URTI has been excluded then they should be immediately referred to A&E for urgent assessment.

Two or more cases in a nursing home
Setting up an outbreak control team is advised. Targeted or mass antibiotic prophylaxis for residents and staff should be considered (depending on factors such as interval between cases, epidemiological links, fatality rate). Infection control measures should be reviewed.

GRADE D

it may be appropriate to undertake additional measures to those stated for nursing homes. This should include the formation of an outbreak control team that would consider all the epidemiological information available to formulate the most appropriate proportional response.

Outbreak control team — initial actions
1. Assess carefully all the epidemiological information available: confirmed and probable cases, serotyping, dates of onset, links between cases, size of population containing the cases, homogeneity of population containing the cases.

2. Inform centres with national responsibility for GAS surveillance, investigation and control. As well as providing expert advice they can assist with case finding and may already be aware of linked cases. See Appendix 2 – contact details.

3. Decide on approach, if any, to chemoprophylaxis based on 1 and 2.

4. Communications strategy to provide clear, consistent and accurate information

GRADE D

When iGAS occurs in injecting drug user populations, local drug action teams should (1) be informed about the clinical manifestations of GS infection (sore throat, fever, skin infection, and/or localised muscle tenderness; (2) disseminate this information among injecting drug users; (3) advise injecting drug users to seek medical attention if they develop such symptoms of if they develop unusual skin lesions.

GRADE D

General practitioners and accident and emergency departments should be alerted to the occurrence of outbreaks of iGAS among injecting drug users.

Clusters
Household clusters
If two or more cases of iGAS occur in the same household within a 30-day time period then the entire household should receive chemoprophylaxis.

Clusters in the wider community
One of the major difficulties in targeting a wider community for intervention is deciding on the population boundaries, often defined by time frame, geography and social characteristics. The extent of the public health response should be decided at a meeting of an outbreak control team.

Risk communication
The risk of iGAS among household contacts is higher than the risk to the general population, but the risk is low and not accurately quantified. The provision of information to case contacts of iGAS is the cornerstone of any risk communication strategy. Template information leaflets for close community contacts of cases are available on the HPA website (www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/strepto/guidelines).

Review date
The Working Group will review this guidance by December 2005.

Acknowledgements
We are very grateful for comments received from individual members of the Public Health Medicine Environmental Group, Association of Medical Microbiologists, Infection Control Nurses Association, CDSC Wales, CDSC Northern Ireland and the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health.

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Appendix 1

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Details of local Health Protection Units in England and contact personnel can be found on the HPA website at <http://www.hpa.org.uk/lars_homepage.htm>.

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