

# MENINGITIS AND SEPTICAEMIA FACTSHEET

September 2022

Meningitis is an illness where the coverings of the brain and spinal cord become inflamed. It can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or other agents.

**Viral meningitis** is rarely serious and is not helped by antibiotics. **Bacterial meningitis** is less common than viral meningitis, but is a serious illness and needs urgent treatment with antibiotics. The most common of the bacteria that cause meningitis is the **meningococcus**. These bacteria can also cause **blood poisoning (septicaemia)**, which is the more serious form of the disease.

The majority of people recover from meningococcal infection. However, the disease can kill in hours if not treated urgently.

## Where are the meningococcus bacteria found?

- These bacteria are very common. At any one time 10-20% of us carry the meningococcus in our nose and throat without knowing it.

## How do we pick up the bacteria?

- We can pick up the meningococcus if we have very close prolonged contact (e.g. living in the same house) with someone carrying it. The contact has to be close because the bacteria are weak and cannot live for more than a few seconds outside the body.
- The bacteria cannot be picked up from water supplies, swimming pools or household objects such as clothes, furniture or cups.

## If the bacteria are so common, why do so few of us develop the illness?

- Even though we come into contact with the meningococcus regularly, our bodies are able to fight off the infection.
- A tiny number of people who pick up the bacteria develop meningitis or septicaemia or both within 2-12 days of doing so. We do not yet fully understand why the bacteria cause such severe illness in these people. It may be due to weaknesses in their body defence systems.
- It is rare for two or more cases to occur together. The majority occur as single cases, with no increased risk to others, e.g. in the school or community.

## What precautions are taken if there is a case?

- A short antibiotic course is given to very close contacts, usually only those living in the same house. The antibiotics are given to kill the bacteria that they may be carrying in their nose or throat, and so reduce the risk of infection to others.
- Although the risk is very low, these close contacts may still develop the disease despite taking the antibiotics. So they need to be on the lookout for symptoms in the week following.

Vaccines are available against some strains of meningococcus. They are given to household and very close contacts in certain circumstances, e.g. if the patient has group A, C, W135 or Y meningococcal infection.

### For further information or general advice contact:

The Meningitis Research Foundation  
Tel: 0808 800 3344 or [www.meningitis.org](http://www.meningitis.org)

Meningitis Now

Tel: 0800 80 10 388 or [www.meningitisnow.org](http://www.meningitisnow.org)

## How can you tell if someone has the disease?

- The early signs of meningitis and septicaemia are non-specific and similar to those of flu and other viral infections. This can make the diagnosis difficult.
- However, someone with meningitis will become very ill. The illness may progress over one or two days, but it can develop very rapidly, sometimes in a matter of hours.
- The signs and symptoms are shown below.

Not all these symptoms may show at once.



Headache



Fever



Vomiting



Neck stiffness,  
joint pains



Drowsiness  
or confusion  
— coma



Dislike of  
bright lights



Rash of red-  
purple spots  
or bruises\*

### WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN BABIES?



Fever



Refusing feeds  
or vomiting



Fretfulness



Child is  
difficult to  
wake



High-pitched/  
moaning cry



Pale or  
blotchy skin



Rash of red-  
purple spots  
or bruises\*

\* In both children and adults, there may be a rash of tiny red-purple spots or bruises caused by bleeding under the skin. This can occur anywhere on the body. It is due to blood poisoning (septicaemia) which sometimes goes with meningitis, particularly the meningococcal strain.

The rash does not fade when pressed e.g., with a glass.

**Seek urgent medical help if you think someone has meningitis.  
Early treatment saves lives.**