
What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is inflammation of the linings surrounding the brain. It can be caused either by bacteria or viruses.

Bacterial meningitis is less common than viral meningitis but more serious, and needs urgent treatment with antibiotics. The meningococcal bacteria are the main cause of bacterial meningitis, but there are other types including pneumococcal, Hib, and Group B streptococcal.

What is Meningococcal Septicaemia?

Meningococcal septicaemia is a type of blood poisoning that is caused by the same type of bacteria that cause the most common form of bacterial meningitis.

What is Meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia are together known as meningococcal disease.

How do you catch Meningococcal infection?

Many people carry the bacteria that causes meningococcal infection (*Neisseria meningitidis*), in the back of the nose and throat. Most of the time they live there without causing harm, and only rarely do they overcome the body's defences and cause illness. It is not known why some people become ill.

Fortunately the bacteria are not as infectious as the common cold and cannot spread by casual contact or simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

The bacteria are spread by direct contact with respiratory and throat secretions, as a result of coughing, sneezing, intimate kissing or prolonged close contact.

Statistics show that children under the age of five and young adults have a higher risk of developing meningitis or septicaemia, although anyone can get these diseases.

How do you suspect if someone has Meningococcal infection?

Meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia may not be easy to spot at first because the symptoms are similar to those of flu. They can develop over a couple of days, but some times very quickly in a matter of hours. Some of the symptoms listed may not occur at all.

In babies:

- ❖ High temperature, possibly with cold hands and feet
- ❖ Vomiting or refusing feeds
- ❖ Blank staring expression
- ❖ Shrill or moaning cry
- ❖ Pale blotchy complexion
- ❖ Floppy
- ❖ Difficult to wake or sleepy
- ❖ The fontanelle (soft spot) may be tense or bulging.

In children and adults:

- ❖ Fever
- ❖ Vomiting
- ❖ Severe headache
- ❖ Neck stiffness
- ❖ Dislike of bright lights
- ❖ Drowsiness
- ❖ Fitting
- ❖ Confusion
- ❖ Painful joints

Septicaemic rash:

- ❖ Patients with septicaemia may also develop a rash. The bacteria damage the blood vessels, allowing blood to leak out under the skin.
- ❖ This causes a rash of red or brown pin prick spots, purple bruises, or blood blisters which can appear anywhere on the body.
- ❖ If a glass tumbler is pressed firmly against the rash it will not fade. You will be able to see the rash through the glass.

If this type of rash is present get medical help immediately.

Can it be treated?

Yes. Meningococcal disease comes on quickly but can be treated with effective antibiotics if it is started as soon as possible. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. People can die if treatment is not started early enough.

Most people with meningococcal disease recover. **Everyone** should know the signs and symptoms to watch out for.

Meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia need URGENT medical attention.

Can it be prevented?

There are different types (strains) of meningococcus, and in the UK most illness is caused by B or C strains. All babies are offered immunisation against the C strain, and this is also available for young adults up to the age of 24 who have not previously received it.

There is presently no vaccine against the B strain. There are vaccines against other strains of the bacteria, which you may come into contact with if you are travelling to parts of Africa or the Middle East, so check with your GP if you need these.

Babies are also offered immunisation against Hib bacteria, and this has reduced the number of cases of meningitis caused by these bacteria.

Is there anything else?

Cases of meningococcal disease must be reported to the Public Health Department. A public health doctor or nurse will decide who needs to be treated.

People who are very close contacts of the ill person are given antibiotics (one dose or a very short course) in order to prevent further cases of the illness. These antibiotics will also kill the bacteria that normally help the body fight infection, so they are only given when absolutely necessary.

Cases can cause a lot of concern in any community. Public Health will also advise schools, employers and the press.

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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NHS Borders on 01896 825522 or email equality@borders.scot.nhs.uk

Produced by: Public Health Dept, NHS Borders, Education Centre, Borders General Hospital, Melrose, TD6 9BD, 01896 825560

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