Aged under 25?
You may be at risk of meningitis and septicaemia

immunisation
the safest way to protect your health
This leaflet:
- provides information on what meningitis and septicaemia are
- describes the signs and symptoms to look out for, and
- gives advice on how to get the MenC vaccine if you have not already received it.

If you are under 25, you will probably already have been immunised with the meningitis C (MenC) vaccine which protects against infection by group C meningococcal bacteria that cause meningitis and septicaemia. If you have not received MenC vaccine and are under 25, you should ask your doctor about getting immunised.

Although the MenC vaccine provides protection against meningitis and septicaemia caused by group C meningococcal infection, it does not protect against other causes of meningitis (such as mumps virus) and septicaemia (such as meningococcal group B bacteria and pneumococcal bacteria). It is vitaly important that you recognise the signs and symptoms of these conditions so that you can get urgent medical attention for yourself or a friend.

You are at greater risk of meningococcal disease if you are under 25, smoke, are a first-year student living in halls of residence, or are living in military barracks.

The diseases

What are meningitis and septicaemia?
Meningitis is an inflammation (infection) of the lining of the brain (meninges). Septicaemia, more commonly known as blood poisoning, is caused when bacteria in the blood stream infect the body and spread through the body. Septicaemia is more serious than meningitis and is more likely to cause death. The signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia are discussed below.

What are the causes of meningococcal infection?
Meningococcal infection is one of the most common causes of meningitis and septicaemia in the UK. However, meningitis can be caused by other bacteria such as pneumococcal and viruses (such as mumps), and septicaemia can be caused by bacteria (such as meningococcal B).

How is meningococcal infection spread?
The bacteria can be spread from one person to another by coughing, sneezing or by close, prolonged contact such as kissing, because the bacteria live in the mouth and throat.

How serious are meningitis and septicaemia?
Although the diseases are rare they can be extremely dangerous. Meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia can kill, with around one in ten people dying as a result of these infections. One in five people dies from the more serious form of meningococcal septicaemia.

If the symptoms are noticed and treatment with antibiotics is given quickly, most people recover fully. Many of those who survive may experience a reduced quality of life with about one in four suffering long-term problems (such as permanent deafness, blindness or amputations).

How many people develop meningococcal disease?
Only a small number of people will develop meningococcal disease. About one in ten adults carries the bacteria in their mouth and throat without developing symptoms of infection (called carriers), but about one in four young people carries it. We do not know why some people become ill and others carry the bug without harm.

Am I at risk of getting meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia?
You are at greater risk of meningococcal disease if you are under 25, a first-year university student (no matter what your age) or if you live in halls of residence, if you smoke or if you live in military barracks.

What can I do to protect myself?
There has been a vaccine available against group C meningococcal disease (MenC) since November 1999. If you have not received the MenC vaccine you should be immunised so you are protected against it. More detailed information on this vaccine is given below.

Are there any other forms of meningococcal infection that I should be aware of?
The most common form of meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia is caused by meningococcal group B bacteria. This accounts for over 80% of meningococcal disease. There is no vaccine currently available against group B disease so you should remain vigilant to the possibility of developing this disease.

The MenC vaccine

When would I have received the MenC vaccine?
MenC vaccination was introduced in November 1999, and since January 2002 it has been available to everyone under 25. It is likely that you will have had the MenC vaccine while at school, college or university. If you had a meningococcal vaccine before 1999, you will need a dose of the MenC vaccine. Your doctor will be able to advise on this.

What does the MenC vaccine protect against?
The vaccine protects you against group C meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia. The vaccine is not live and contains parts of the bacteria that should provide protection without causing the disease. You only need one dose, which is given by injection. One injection gives long-term protection.

This vaccine does not protect you against all causes of meningitis and septicaemia, so you need to watch out for the signs and symptoms described in this leaflet.

Meningitis and septicaemia can kill

Where should I go to be immunised?
You can arrange to be immunised at your GP's surgery.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?
The side effects of the vaccine are usually mild and do not last very long. About one to two days after the jab you may have a sore arm and some redness and swelling where the injection was given. This will usually go away within a few days. You may develop a slight temperature which lasts for a few hours, or you may get a headache.

Are there any reasons why I should not have this vaccine?
You should not have this vaccine if you are ill and have a temperature. If you have had an anaphylactic reaction (a severe reaction needing urgent medical attention) to a previous immunisation, you'll need to check with your doctor or nurse first. Tell your doctor or nurse if you think you might be pregnant.
The signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia?
The MenC vaccine does not protect you against all causes of meningitis and septicaemia so it is very important that you are aware of all the signs and symptoms.

Early signs may be similar to many infections and can include:
- being sick
- a fever, and
- pain and aches in your back or joints.

Get medical help urgently if you or someone else:
- can’t stand bright lights
- has a very bad headache
- has very cold hands and feet
- has a stiff neck
- develops a rash which looks like a bruise and doesn’t fade under pressure (do the glass test – see below), or
- becomes disorientated (dazed and confused) and starts to lose consciousness, possibly falling into a coma.

Do the glass test
If you press the side of a drinking glass firmly against the rash, it should fade and lose colour under the pressure. If it doesn’t change colour, contact your doctor immediately. If your doctor is not available go straight to the emergency department of your nearest hospital.

What should I do if I think someone has meningitis or septicaemia?
If you are worried that you or someone you know might have meningitis or septicaemia, go to the emergency department of your nearest hospital immediately or contact your GP.

Acting quickly could save a life. A person who is diagnosed as having meningitis or septicaemia will need to be treated with antibiotics straight away, and go into hospital.

If you’ve had the new MenC vaccine before – either while you were still at school or college, or when you started university or higher education – you will not need to have the vaccine again. If you haven’t had the vaccine and are under 25, talk to your practice nurse or GP now.

Further information
The Meningitis Research Foundation and The Meningitis Trust both provide information on meningitis.

Phone the Meningitis Research Foundation’s free 24-hour helpline on 0800 3344 or visit the website at www.meningitis.org.

Phone the Meningitis Trust’s 24-hour helpline on 0845 6000 800 or visit the website at www.meningitis-trust.org.

You can also visit www.immunisation.nhs.uk or phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.