THE TWO MAIN BACTERIAL FORMS

In the UK there are two main types of bacterial meningitis which cause most of the reported bacterial cases. They are meningococcal and pneumococcal meningitis. *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) which was recently a major cause of bacterial meningitis has now been almost eliminated by vaccination of infants.

WHERE THE BACTERIA ARE FOUND AND HOW THEY ARE SPREAD

The bacteria which cause both meningococcal and pneumococcal meningitis are very common and live naturally in the back of the nose and throat, or the upper respiratory tract.

People of any age can carry the germs for days, weeks or months without becoming ill. In fact, being a carrier helps to boost natural immunity. At any one time, around 10 to 25 per cent of the population are carriers. Only rarely do the bacteria overcome the body’s defences and cause meningitis.

The bacteria are spread between people by prolonged close contact and by coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing. They cannot live for long outside the body, so they cannot be picked up from water supplies, swimming pools, buildings or factories.

The incubation period is between two and ten days.

TREATMENT OF BACTERIAL MENINGITIS

Urgent treatment with antibiotics is essential for someone with bacterial meningitis. The sooner they are diagnosed and treated, the greater chance there is they will make a full recovery.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Anyone, anywhere can contract meningitis, but those most at risk are children under five, teenagers and young adults, and older people. Most cases are isolated and not related to another case or an “outbreak”.

Bacterial meningitis is fairly uncommon, but it can be extremely serious. It is fatal in one in 10 cases and one in seven survivors is left with a serious disability, such as deafness or brain injury.