MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS

Meningococcal meningitis (caused by the bacterium Neisseria meningitidis) is the most common bacterial form in the UK, accounting for more than half the cases. There are several different groups. Group B is the most common (around two-thirds of cases), followed by group C (one-third). A new vaccine that will give long-term protection against the C strain has now been introduced into the childhood immunisation schedule. Numbers of cases of group C infection are likely to fall rapidly.

Most cases are isolated incidents, but clusters of cases (i.e., two or more cases) of meningococcal meningitis have been recorded in many different parts of the country. It is not always clear why these clusters happen, but they do not seem to be related to environmental factors, e.g., air conditioning, water supplies.

PNEUMOCOCCAL MENINGITIS

Caused by the bacterium Streptococcus pneumoniae, pneumococcal meningitis usually occurs in older adults and young children. It causes about a tenth of bacterial meningitis cases, has a high fatality rate (about 20%) and is associated with a higher risk of permanent neurological damage.

The bacteria are commonly found in the respiratory tract and may be transferred via the bloodstream or as a result of an infection of the middle ear or sometimes through a tiny fracture or defect in the linings of the brain. Very rarely, this may result in recurring cases of pneumococcal meningitis and surgery may be needed to repair the defect.

HIB (HAEMOPHILUS INFLUENZAE TYPE B) MENINGITIS

About two-fifths of bacterial meningitis cases were due to Hib before the introduction of the Hib vaccine into the routine immunisation programme in October 1992. This has dramatically reduced the number of Hib meningitis cases. Hib was the most common form of bacterial meningitis in infants, and very few cases occur after the age of four. This type of meningitis is now rare.