MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS AND SEPTICAEMIA

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissues that cover the brain and spinal cord. It can be caused by several different bacteria, viruses and fungi.

What is septicaemia?

Some germs which cause meningitis can also cause blood poisoning (septicaemia).

How do people get meningococcal meningitis or septicaemia?

The bacterium which causes the most common form of meningitis and septicaemia is meningococcus. Up to 25% of young people (at any one time) can carry these bacteria naturally at the back of the throat or nose. They can be passed on during very close contact particularly in crowded, warm, moist and smoky environments by coughing, sneezing or kissing.

Most of us have a natural resistance to these bacteria. However, a tiny proportion of people become ill with meningitis and/or septicaemia when the bacteria overcome the body’s immune defences and pass into the spinal fluid or bloodstream through the lining of the throat or nose.

How common is meningococcal infection?

The incidence in the UK remains steady at about 2000 cases each year, but the death rate is dropping due to prompt action and treatment through increased public awareness and national management guidelines. 1 in 10 can die from meningitis and from 2 in 10 can die from septicaemia.

What is the incubation period?

The incubation period (time from picking up the bacteria to becoming ill) is about 2–10 days. By that time you have either developed an immunity to it, and possibly become a symptomless carrier, or will have developed the illness with some of the following symptoms:-

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

* Severe headache
* Drowsiness
* Stiff neck
* Dislike of bright lights
* Repeated vomiting
* Fever
* Irritability and refusal to feed in babies

What are the symptoms of meningococcal septicaemia?

* Rash (does not go away when pressed).
* Very cold hands and feet
* Rapid breathing
* Increased drowsiness>unconsciousness
* Pains in limbs, joints abdomen
* Difficulty in standing or walking
* Fever
* Repeated vomiting

What is the treatment?

Although not very common, meningococcal illness is very dangerous and can develop rapidly.

Prompt treatment with strong antibiotics can cure infection and save lives.

When are antibiotics and vaccinations given to contacts?

Very close contacts of someone who is suffering from the infection have an increased risk of developing the disease. These people will be identified by the doctors managing the case and given antibiotics to kill any bacteria they may be carrying, so that they cannot pass them on to others, and given vaccination which is available for only certain strains of the meningococcus.

The antibiotics will not prevent them from developing the illness themselves if the bacteria have already got into their bloodstream.

Awareness of the signs and symptoms and prompt action and treatment is still important for any contacts.

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