**Prevention of Meningitis**

Apart from vaccines, there is no known way to protect against meningitis. However, it is not highly infectious and only the patient's close family contacts are at any significant risk of becoming ill. With meningococcal disease and sometimes with Hib, antibiotics are offered to these contacts. Other contacts, like school friends or colleagues, are rarely at higher risk so do not normally need treatment.

Awareness of the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia, and being prepared to take action is very important.

Research shows that exposure to smoking in the household setting can increase the chances of a child contracting meningitis.

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**Vaccines**

**Meningococcal**

The meningococcus has three main strains - A, B and C. Most UK disease is caused by the B and C strains. A combined vaccine for the A and C strains has been available for some years. It is used for protection of travellers and others but it is ineffective in very young children, and even in older children and adults, protection lasts for only about three years.

A new, more effective vaccine for the C strain, that will protect infants and young children, and will give long-term protection to all, was introduced in the UK childhood immunisation schedule in 1999. It is available for infants and for older children. It should rapidly reduce the numbers of cases of group C meningococcal disease.

Effective vaccines for the B strain are still some years away.

**Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib)**

A vaccine against Hib disease has formed part of the routine immunisation programme for all babies in the UK since October 1992. It is given in three doses, at two, three and four months at the same time as diphtheria, tetanus and polio immunisations. The vaccine also protects against other severe infections caused by the Hib bacteria, such as epiglottitis, cellulitis and septic arthritis. As a result of immunisation, Hib meningitis cases have fallen dramatically.

The vaccine does not protect against any other forms of meningitis.

**Pneumococcal**

A vaccine to protect against pneumococcal disease is recommended for those at particularly high risk - those with sickle cell disease, thalassemia or whose spleen has been removed, the elderly and others affected by illnesses such as heart disease, liver disease and diabetes. However meningitis is an uncommon presentation of pneumococcal infection. More effective pneumococcal vaccines are currently being tested in trials.